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DETECTIVE TALES

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THE SUSPENSE MAGAZINE



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DETECTIVE TALES



**WITH LOVE
AND BULLETS!**

by **LARRY HOLDEN**



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VOL. FIFTY

FEBRUARY, 1953

NUMBER THREE

Three Suspense-Packed Novellets

- WITH LOVE AND BULLETS!**.....**Larry Holden** 10
—for an ex-wife, I took off for Florida. Her hubby had instructed: "Shoot, if she acts friendly, but if she smiles—run for your life!"
- MURDER SHIP!**.....**John Haviland** 36
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—and you'd better get Blackie Blair first, for he's planning to play at your funeral!

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- THE SECOND MISTAKE**.....**Ted Jones** 27
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- GOLD-PLATED GIRL**.....**Talmage Powell** 70
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—deserved to die, but Blount should have asked one question before he fired. . . .
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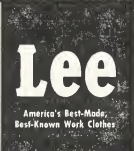
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THE CRIME CLINIC

GREETINGS, friends. Usually, this department is given over to a study of the habits and peculiarities of lawbreakers. In past issues, we've probably covered almost every known wrinkle the ladies and gentlemen of the Underworld ever figured out. Actually, of course, we'll have more surprises for you in issues to come.

This issue, though, we want to tell you about a man who never committed a crime in his life. He was admired by the Police Forces of the world, and detested by the crooks. In fact, as far as we know, he only made one slight error in judgment; he wrote a book.

And for what happened then, here's the story—as told to us by Harold Helfer:

Books are generally considered to be aids in the reforming and rehabilitation of criminals. But there is one book in existence, which—if it ever fell into the hands of the underworld—would cause great and irreparable damage to the law-abiding world.

Well, a man we shall call Charles Carney—which isn't his real name—was the greatest safecracker of them all. He knew everything there was to know about opening any kind of safe, anywhere, under any circumstances.

What is more—something probably no

yeggman could ever quite understand—Charles Carney was strictly honest. His safecracking was all legitimate. But whenever a safe, be it in a bank or some mercantile institution, or perhaps in the wall of a private home, got stuck, why, Mr. Carney was the man who was usually hired to open it.

He was so good that he frequently traveled thousands of miles from his home in New York City to crack some stubborn receptacle of wealth or important papers... not only in this country but in other continents as well. In fact, there were few parts of the world to which Charles Carney hadn't been called to show his masterful skill at one time or another.

Even the bottom of the sea knew of his deft fingers and supreme know-how. Once he went down to the ocean floor in a deep sea diving outfit to examine the safe of a sunken ship. He had quite a close call, too. He got stuck down there, and it was an hour before he could be rescued. It was touch and go as to whether they would be able to save his life. When the ordeal was over his hair had turned completely white.

Another time, some crooks captured him and tried to force him to open a safe for them. But he preferred to be beaten sense-

(Continued on page 110)



"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—*Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931."*

JOAN THE WAD

is the **LUCKY CORNISH PISKEY** who Sees All, Hears All, Does All.

That is why there is more health, less unemployment and more contented people in Cornwall than elsewhere, but all these benefits can be obtained if you live elsewhere by adopting *Joan the Wad*.

JOAN THE WAD is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER FROM THE LUCKY SAINT'S WELL

DOCTOR GAVE UP HOPE—CURED—BETTER HEALTH

"Dear Joan the Wad. Since I received you a few months ago I have had lots of luck. First of all I had to come into hospital with an Osteomyelitis leg. The doctor gave up hopes of my recovery but after I was sent home I then sent to you, for a Joan the Wad and believe me I started to get well again and now I am back again in hospital as one leg had grown longer than the other. I then brought Joan in with me. I carried her to the operating theatre table and the bone was taken away from my thigh and my operation has proved a success. Next my knee has been straight for three years, now with exercise and massage it is starting to bend. I am sure that Joan the Wad has brought me lots of luck. If ever anyone says in here I'm always unlucky I always say send for a Joan the Wad. Wherever I go I will recommend her. I do hope you accept my story as I am a great believer in her. Yours sincerely, P. H., Sturges Ward, Wingfield Hospital, Oxford.

INCREASE IN WAGES

"... already after one fortnight we have had luck. I won ... mm of \$84 ... also have got \$2.80 per week increase in wages unexpected so Joan the Wad must be our lucky Star. So please send Jack O'Lantern to make the pair complete. (Mrs.) D. M., Kirkgate, Leeds.

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard before of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish the selections from time to time. We unreservedly **GUARANTEE** that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at **JOAN'S COTTAGE**. Send at once for this **PROVED** Luck Bringer. You, too, may find benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

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No. 257.—"My husband is a keen competitor in 'Bullets' and 'Nuggets.' He had not any luck until I gave him **JOAN THE WAD**, when the first week he secured a credit note in 'Nuggets' and last week **FIRST** prize in 'Nuggets' \$840."—Mrs. A. B., Salford.

\$84,000 WINNER

No. 222.—"Mrs. A. ... of Lewisham, has just won \$84,000 and says she has a **JOAN THE WAD**, so please send one to me."—Mrs. V., Bromley.

Just send Two Dallar notes or an International Money Order and a large self-addressed envelope to:

JOAN'S COTTAGE, 22, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENG.

and I will send you both History and Mascot.



ODDITIES IN CRIME

By JAKOBSSON and STONE



A classified ad appeared some years ago in a southern trade paper, offering a thousand dollar prize for the best five-pound sample of Kentucky Burley tobacco. Simultaneously, a company doing business at the same address advertised nationally that it was selling Kentucky tobacco at five pounds for a dollar. After much tobacco and many dollars had flowed through the mail, with no thousand dollar prize ever forthcoming, police investigated, found a Louisville office building where twenty girls worked diligently for an employer they had never met personally.

When traced at last, he proved to have been directing the swindle, right from the start, from a cell in Frankfurt reformatory, where he was a convict.

Add this to your list of once-in-a-lifetime thefts. Many a thief has been trapped by fingerprints. Colin William Wyatt, a dreamy type of larcenist, was caught by something finer. Wing prints. Colin, a British lad, had had butterflies on his mind from earliest childhood. He collected them for pleasure. In Australia, in adulthood, private troubles made him revert to the childish opiate. He stole two thousand butterflies from a Melbourne museum, to forget the wife who'd deserted him, and fled to England.

There Scotland Yard found him with the goods. The burglered butterflies over which Colin brooded, a lonely criminal, were identified by their wing prints.



Small time swindlers might take a lesson from Tom Patten, one of our time's master crooks, who rooked the people of California out of millions of dollars before he was forty. Before the law caught up with him and sent him to jail, Tom was never a fugitive—never had to scheme or hide—never had to give an accounting.

All he did was ordain himself a minister, hit the road, and ask for thousand-dollar bills in the name of religion. It is interesting that he could do this publicly and flagrantly for more than fifteen years, living on the fat of the land, before the law was able to stop him.

His sentence, five to fifty years in jail.

Vincenzo Marvasi, of Naples, took his grievances to court some years ago. A neighbor, with whom he had played dice, had cheated him, he complained. Rino Vinciguerra had put up a stake of sixty dollars in money—and Vincenza, at the moment moneyless, had had to match it in goods. He'd lost the throw. Now he averred that the stakes had been too unequal—that the thing he'd lost was worth more than sixty dollars.

The thing? Vincenza's wife.

A spluttering judge explained that a wife was not a thing, even among gambling gentry, sent for Rino and his blushing winnings immediately. He told the lady that she was legally free. Shyly, she said she'd rather stay won.



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"DREAM GIRL" She'll look alluring, breathtaking, enticing, exotic. . . . Just picture her in it . . . beautiful, fascinating SEE-THRU sheer. Naughty but nice. . . . It's French Fashion finery . . . with peek-a-boo magic lace. . . . Gorgeously transparent yet completely practical (washes like a dream . . . will not shrink). Has lacy waistline, lacy shoulder straps and everything to make her love you for it. A charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. . . . In gorgeous Black.

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City State

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WITH LOVE AND BULLETS!

By LARRY HOLDEN

"Deliver these bonds to my ex-wife," Kuykendall instructed. "And watch out for the little she-wolf. If she acts friendly, put a bullet in her. But if she smiles at you—run for your life!"

TROUBLE comes in all kinds of packages, but this particular package was in his sixties, had bristly gray hair like a schnauser, a pair of electric blue eyes that crackled like a short circuit, and a voice that should have been booked for assault and battery. His name was Jesse C. Kuykendall, and





She was cold-blooded enough to make you shiver, but she had Harry right where she wanted him

he was as crazy as they came—uncommitted.

We were sitting in the law office of Bert Campbell. That is, Bert and I were sitting. This other character kept jumping up and down as if he had a hot foot in the seat of his pants.

"Mr. Kuykendall has a little job for you, Lew," said Bert, trying to keep from laughing.

"That's right, a job," yelled Kuykendall, leaping to his feet and glowering at me. "Are you honest?"

"Reasonably," I said.

"That's a lie! Nobody's honest. You only think you're honest because nobody's offered you your price yet. I'm not honest. I'm a dirty crook. Always was. And Campbell here, he's a shyster that uses the law to keep his crookedness legal. But I don't care if you're honest or not. You'll be bonded."

He plumped back in his chair and leered at me, as if he'd put over a fast one and was proud of it.

"Mr. Kuykendall," said Bert, "has a certain package that you are to deliver to his ex-wife, who is now living on Mafiana Key in Florida—"

Kuykendall sprang from his chair as if he were coming out of his corner to try for a first-round knockout. "What are we beating around the bush for?" he snarled. "All this about certain packages and this, that, and the other thing. Tell him what's in the package. Scare the pants off him. That's the way to keep 'em honest! Scare them!"

"In the package, Lew," sighed Bert. "there will be fifty thousand dollars in negotiable Power and Light bonds. They will be insured for full value."

Kuykendall said, "Ha!" and grinned triumphantly at me. He had put over another fast one on me.

"Mr. Kuykendall," I said to Bert, "could save himself a lot of trouble, expense and worry if he simply sent the bonds by registered mail, insured."

I thought Kuykendall would have apoplexy. His arms exploded in all directions, his eyes bugged out and he began to beat on the desk with both fists.

"I wouldn't spend one penny," he howled, "to enrich those blood-sucking crooks down in Washington. I wouldn't spend one penny on a stamp even to send them a time bomb to blow them to Kingdom Come. I wouldn't spend one penny on a match to set them afire. Let them stew in their own juice. Let them be hoist on their own petard!"

"Mr. Kuykendall," said Bert, sneaking in a wink, "has just written a pamphlet proving that the U. S. Mail is a sink of iniquity."

"A disgrace!" growled Kuykendall. "I wouldn't sully my conscience by using it. I've been using special messengers for years."

"Furthermore," said Bert, "you are not to deliver the bonds to the ex-Mrs. Kuykendall until she hands over to you the patent rights on a dual carburetor that Mr. Kuykendall invented. Mr. Kuykendall will pay you thirty-five dollars a day and expenses. You will drive down, leaving for Florida at exactly six o'clock tomorrow morning. You have, on Mr. Kuykendall's instructions, already been bonded without your knowledge so that you would have no opportunity whatever of tampering with the bond."

I said, "Drive down! Why can't I take a plane?"

"Nobody in my employ," said Kuykendall ominously, "ever sets foot in a plane."

"Mr. Kuykendall," Bert explained, "is suing several of the airways for infringement of patent and he refuses to enrich them until the suit is settled. In his favor, of course. Anyway, Lew, it will be a pleasant drive, three days down, three days back, with one day allowed for a swim in the Gulf of Mexico. Altogether, seven days at thirty-five dollars a day and expenses. Lord love me, Lew, I'd jump at a chance of a

free, Florida vacation like that, myself."

"I wouldn't trust you twelve hundred miles with fifty thousand dollars worth of negotiable bonds," sneered Kuykendall.

I HATE long drives. Some people get a kick out of them, but to me they're nothing but a dreary grind. I made up my mind to take Jerry, my kid brother, who was just back from Korea. I didn't say anything about this to Kuykendall or Bert. Kuykendall would probably have hit the ceiling. Once I had made up my mind to that, I didn't mind the idea of the drive. The kid would enjoy it.

Kuykendall had it all figured out for me. I would drive exactly four hundred miles each day; I would stop for the night at the motor courts he designated; I would drive at a fixed rate of speed; and I would arrive on Manaña Key at 10:10 P.M. on Friday, the twenty-third. His ex-wife would be waiting, at that time, with the patent rights, all ready to exchange them for the Power and Light bonds.

"But Friday's the twenty-second, not the twenty-third," I said.

"I said she'll be waiting for you!" he said belligerently. "I sent her a letter. Don't argue with me. I never argue. Anybody gives me an argument, I fire him! She'll be waiting for you. You will deliver the bonds in a steel mesh bag chained to your wrist by a handcuff. I have sent the keys to the bag and handcuff to the local chief of police. He will be a witness when the bag is opened. I have also sent him a fifty-dollar gratuity, so possibly he might be able to tear himself away from swilling liquor in his favorite gin mill for an hour or two. Do you have a gun, Sonny?"

Bert was making pacifying gestures at me, so I said yes, I had a gun.

"Then take it with you," said Kuykendall grimly. "That ex-wife of mine is a cold-blooded female tigress! Keep your gun in your hand every minute you're talking to her, and don't turn your back on her.

She'll tear your throat out and laugh in your face while you're dying. She's a succubus. She doesn't have a drop of blood in her veins. It's all rattlesnake venom. Now good-bye to both of you."

He tramped to the door, turned and showed us his teeth. "But don't start cashing in those bonds until you've stolen them, and always remember, it's not me you'll be diddling; it'll be the insurance company, and they'll see you in hell before they'll let you get away with it!" He gave us a mean, superior laugh and strutted out.

I looked at Bert.

"Where do you get them from?" I asked.

He shook his head gloomily. "I don't know," he said. "But that old goat isn't as crazy as he sounds. He's made more than a few millions, so he must have more in his head than butterflies. That ex-wife of his must really have him over the hip. He'd rather part with an arm and a leg than those Power and Light bonds. They're his pets. I know, because I've been handling his investments. He's turned down some offers for them that made my fingers itch, but he won't sell. He gets spells like that. Of course, he does need those patents. He turned them over to her some years ago when he was being sued. To protect them. He needs them for this suit against the Airways."

"He wasn't serious about that gun business, was he?"

"Well," Bert grinned at me, "his ex-wife did shoot her first husband. Claimed he tried to clamp a bear trap around her neck. The bear trap was right there on her bed, and his fingerprints were all over it, so the jury acquitted her. She made a cool quarter of a million on that deal—which she ran through in no time at all, and then married Jesse C. Kuykendall. They stayed married three years, then she divorced him and got a whopping settlement. It seems she ran through that, too. She's expensive. Beautiful woman, absolutely the most beau-

tiful woman I've ever seen, but if you stuck a thermometer in her mouth, I'd give a hundred to one she'd register somewhere around sixty below zero on the Fourth of July. She's as cold, my friend, as the Arctic ice cap, and twice as hard. So watch yourself. She'll diddle you if she can."

"Charming," I said drily. "And I'm the private eye who won't take divorce cases because they're too dirty."

"Dirty!" Bert laughed. "You should have seen the receipt Kuykendall wanted me to draw up for her to sign on delivery of the bonds. It was six pages long and all in fine print. He wanted me to stick in so many jokers that she'd not only have to return the bonds to him, but she'd have to spend the rest of her life in court fighting to keep herself out of the pokey for ninety-nine years. He's a vindictive little skunk, and he loves litigation."

"Nothing would make him happier than doing her out of the bonds and hauling her into court for extortion on top of it. However, I wouldn't draw it up for him. He practically climbed the walls and tore out the ceiling with his teeth, but I finally convinced him that she'd have a shyster of her own, and we wouldn't be able to put anything like that over on her. So I drew up a simple transfer that she'll sign and give to you with the patent papers. No jokers in it. Her own lawyer will undoubtedly be there, and he'll advise her to sign, so you'll have no trouble."

"And do you really think he sent those keys to the handcuff and bag to the local chief of police?" I asked incredulously.

Bert smiled wearily. "That's the kind of thing he does all the time. Will we see you at six in the morning? I'm actually ashamed to ask you to do a thing like this—a stooge job—but it's good pay, and nothing to worry about. After all, Lew, think what I have to go through with this comedian. I have to deal with him all the time!"

"Why can't I fly down and not say anything about it?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. Those motor courts, where you're supposed to stop, will send him a telegram when you arrive. He's got that all arranged. You can't fool him. Be a good guy and drive down and arrive there on schedule at ten P.M. on Friday. Take my word for it, he'll know if you arrive even five minutes early. I'm not supposed to tell you this, but I've got a thousand dollar check here for you—he's generous when it suits him. Do it the way he says, and the thousand is yours. Do it any other way and you'll spend the rest of your life in court trying to collect even a penny. That's the way he is. Okay?"

"What the hell," I said, thinking of Jerry, the kid brother, "it'll be a nice vacation."

SIX o'clock the next morning, in Bert's office, was quite a circus. Kuykendall was there with about fourteen witnesses while Bert brought out the steel mesh bag from his safe, unlocked it, and in the presence of everybody, put in the bonds one by one, and clamped it around my wrist. I felt as if I were about to carry the word to Garcia. But Kuykendall was not quite satisfied.

"Let me see your gun," he barked at me, holding out a stubby hand that looked as if it would rather take me around the neck.

By this time, he merely amused me, so I dropped my .38 Bankers Special into his palm. It was a neat and wicked little piece of hardware, a real pal at close range.

He wrinkled his nose and turned the gun in his hands as if it were made of bubble gum. He tossed it into Bert's waste basket and said contemptuously, "No stopping power, no shock—a target pistol. Then he handed me an Army .45 automatic that you almost required an engineer's degree to operate.

"Where am I supposed to be going?" I asked him with lost irony. "On a moose hunt? Wouldn't it be better if I mounted a

machine gun on the hood of the car, or dragged a caisson with a hunk of field artillery? I've got to protect myself, you know."

"A smart aleck, eh?" he jeered. "Wait till you have to use it, then you'll thank me. Give him the license, Campbell."

With a perfectly straight face, Bert handed me the license, plus another piece of paper that made me a U.S. marshal, entitled to carry a gun anywhere in the U.S. and possessions, including the Virgin Islands. I laughed.

"Now I'm a G-man," I said.

Kuykendall nodded smugly. "That's right," he said. "And it's twenty years to life in Leavenworth if there's any funny business, Sonny."

It gave me a very chilling feeling down the bumps of my backbone, the way he said it. He meant it, and any guy who could get me appointed, even temporarily, a U.S. marshal just to run a simple errand for him, would have the necessities to make a federal rap stick.

Jesse Kuykendall wasn't a comedian. He was a dangerous lunatic. I began to wish I had taken an easier way to earn my biscuits.

They all saw me down to the car. Bert handed me a package and said gravely: "A little going-away gift, Lew. A bottle of after-shave lotion." It turned out to be a pint of dear old Grandad's best bourbon, for which I was duly grateful that night when we stopped in Virginia.

Kuykendall leaned in the window and insisted on shaking hands with me. He squeezed once as if he wanted to make sure I hadn't palmed any of his hundred dollar bills, and said sourly, "I'd go myself, but I wouldn't be found dead in the same state with my ex-wife. In fact, that's what I'm afraid of. Good luck, sonny, and if you find her specially cordial, reach for your gun. If she smiles at you—run!"

I stepped on the starter, put the car in gear and eased up on the clutch. Kuyken-

dall kept his hand on the window edge and trotted half way down the street beside the car, barking advice at me, most of which had to do with shooting first and asking questions afterward.

I PICKED up the kid brother, Jerry, on Broad Street in Newark. I'm big, but he's bigger. Six-foot-two, blond, built like a fullback, and with a grin that would melt the scruples of angels.

"Move over, Junior," he said. "Driving's a man's job."

He loved to drive, and I had no objection. I showed him the Army .45 automatic that Kuykendall had given me.

"What do you think of this?"

"Put it away. You're only bragging. That's a man's gun, Junior. The first time you pull the trigger, you'll wish you had your water pistol back."

He laughed, a big hearty laugh that made my own laugh sound like a school girl's.

We had lunch in Baltimore and camped for the night in the Virginia motor court Kuykendall had designated. I was not surprised to find that Kuykendall had already paid our bill for the night. Bert had warned me that he was thorough. Within fifteen minutes after hitting the town, Jerry had a lovely young blonde giggling on his arm, looking up into his face as if he were a young maharajah. I don't know how he does it, or where he gets the energy. Me, I was so ready for the sack, it seemed to leap up to meet me as I approached it. He introduced her as Margot and insinuated that she had a friend.

I said, "I don't believe it, because a real friend would never have let *you* pick her up. Good night, girlie. I'm going to hit the sack, and if you're smart, you'll stay on your toes."

The next night we were in Georgia, where we had southern fried chicken and hush puppies for dinner. It was southern fried chicken that would make the Great Stone Face drool.

But when I patted my belly and mentioned it to Jerry, he grinned and tilted his chin at the cashier of the restaurant.

"Now there, Junior," he said, "is what I call *real* Southern chicken. You're getting old."

Ten minutes later he was hanging over her counter with a toothpick in his mouth, and her black eyes were full of happy laughter. He didn't hit the sack that morning until four A.M. But he was fresh as a daisy during the drive the next day, laughing and singing, and advising me to buy a new rocking chair.

CHAPTER TWO

Nina Finds a Body

WE WERE right on Kuykendall's schedule all the way through. I was very careful about that. We had stopped in both the motor courts he had demanded, and we hit Mañana Key at 9:30 that night. We stalled around for fifteen minutes, watching the fishermen on the bridge—down in Florida they call them causeways—hauling up those big black-and-silver striped fish they call sheephead, but which really look like a heavyweight angel fish, and a villainous-looking thing, with barracuda jaws, called a snook.

We had strolled up on the bridge—or causeway—just to kill time so I could keep to the timetable, and Jerry nudged me with his elbow.

"Look at that moon," he said.

I looked. It was fabulous, as big and yellow as a fried egg.

"What a moon!" I said. Then suddenly suspicious, "Wait a minute, since when. . . ."

But he was already grinning and waggling his thumb at a custom-made redhead, who was hanging over the rail with a bait-casting rod in her hand. Two minutes later, Jerry had the rod in one hand and the redhead in the other arm, showing her how to cast, but nobody can tell me that a redhead

would laugh that way just at the idea of catching a fish.

When my wrist watch told me that it was time to be pushing on to be on schedule, I went over to them and growled, "Okay, All-American Boy, let's shove off. You can earn your merit badge tomorrow."

Jerry waggled the redhead's cute little nose between his thumb and forefinger, grinned, "See you, honey," and ambled peaceably back to the car with me.

"Dames," he said. "I love them. Why don't you latch onto a dame once in awhile yourself, Junior? You might like it. You never can tell. What's the matter, did you promise Mother never to look at one, or something?"

"Drop dead!" I snarled.

He grinned.

Kuykendall had given me a map to his ex-wife's place at the end of Mañana Key. There was a private road that branched from the main road, and her place was at the extreme southern tip of the island. The private road was a daisy, composed chiefly of sand dunes, and surrounded by mangrove, sea grape, and cabbage palms. I should have brought a jeep.

We came finally to rest, with the front wheels squarely against a palm log placed across the road. Over the palm log was a chain stretched between two trees and a little sign hung from the middle of it saying *Private*. This was the beginning of Kuykendall's ex-wife's property. He had marked it on the map, including even the palm log.

Jerry and I got out of the car to remove it and lift the chain so that we could drive through. We were bending over to lift it by either end, when two floodlights sprang on, illuminating us like the first-act chorus of *The Desert Song*, and a voice roared out of the trees overhead:

"Just straighten up, boys, and stand still. Be good and nothing will happen to you."

It wasn't a human voice. It was a roaring, distorted voice coming from an ampli-

fler concealed in the palm fronds above us. I ground my teeth. That Army .45 that Kuykendall had given me was back in the glove compartment of the car because it was too bulky to wear.

I saw Jerry slide me a sidelong glance and I quickly shook my head at him.

The amplifier roared, "Here's a key." It splattered into the sand in front of me, tied to a four-inch length of one-by-two so that I could not miss it. "Unlock that bag from your wrist, then get back in your car and drive over to the beach. Stay there a half hour—"

Jerry whirled and dived for the car. I cried, "No, kid, no!" but I was too late. A shot rang out and I saw him throw up his hands, stagger in the heavy sand and go down with a shawl of blood spilling over his face.

"Hold it!" the amplifier roared sharply as I stiffened in a surge of insane fury. "Hold it or you'll get the same. Pick up that key and unlock the bag and be quick about it. I'll count to three. One . . . two . . ."

I picked up the key and unlocked the bag. I couldn't do anything else. He, she, or it, whatever it was, could just as easily have shot me down and unlocked the bag anyway. I dropped the bag into the sand, but slipped the key into the palm of my hand.

"Now walk backward to the rear of your car!" I was ordered.

I slid an agonized glance toward Jerry's body lying face downward in the sand, but obeyed slowly.

I heard the dry rattle as someone slipped through the palmetto at the side of the road and I tried to turn and meet the charge, but he, she or it must have had a sap three feet long, because it came down on the side of my head before I could see anything but the empty waste of palmetto, mangrove, and sea grape that lined the road.

I plunged down into the roaring vortex of a whirlpool of darkness, crying out from

the despair within me: "Jerry, Jerry, kid. . . ."

THEY say being born is a rough business—but coming back to consciousness after being slugged, really slugged is worse, because you can feel it with all your senses, which a baby can't. You can taste the salty blood on your tongue, all sounds tear at your eardrums, there is an acridness in your nostrils as if someone had shoved hot tar up them, and the light becomes splinters of glass in your eyeballs.

I tried to groan as I was coming out of it, because I felt that if I could only groan, it would ease the pain and clear the nasal passages so that I could breathe again, but it was like trying to breathe after being hit hard in the solar plexus. I could not, no matter how hard I tried, emit a sound. I was lying on something. I could feel it under my fingers—short, harsh, yet resilient, a rug. A rug with cut loops. Not an uncut-loop rug, like a pebble-twist, but a cut-loop like an Oriental. I felt like a blind ant crawling voiceless and hurt.

I heard a feminine voice, beautiful and crystal clear saying, "But for heaven's sake, Harry, what are we going to do with them?"

The masculine voice rumbled uneasily in return, "Nina, please, control yourself."

"I won't control myself. There's a dead man out in the roadway, and there's this other one over here. I'm sure they're the messengers from Jesse. But where are the bonds. He said he would send me the bonds. What happened?"

"Nina, please! Stop acting. I can always tell when you're acting, and you're acting. Stop it! I've got to think. And you've got to tell me the truth. Did you have anything to do with that dead man out in the roadway?"

"Don't be a fool! I'm not acting. There's a dead man out there in the roadway. Is that something I'd be likely to act about? I didn't call you up to bleat at me like a

sheep. I want some advice—fast. . . .”

I could open my eyes and I could see painfully. I *was* lying on a rug in front of a sofa. My hands were tied, and so were my feet. The two who were talking were standing tensely in front of a large fireplace, a fireplace with an opening big enough to roast a pig. She was dressed in white. She was dark. Her hair was black and her skin was sun-toasted to a deep coffee. Bert Campbell had said she was beautiful, but my idea of beauty stopped at the pony line of the Frou-Frou Club in Newark. She made every woman I have ever seen look like an insipid, washed-out frump.

Kuykendall had called her a tigress, but she wasn't. She was a panther of a woman, as vital, as sinous, tawny, animal. Her head was small, beautifully shaped, but her mouth was wide, and thin-lipped, promising passion. Her eyes, even at that distance, flashed green in the lamplight. She was standing with her legs apart and I could see the thrust of her full thighs against the white nylon of her skirt.

She was breathing heavily and her high, proud breasts were trembling. Her head was thrown back, her expression angry and contemptuous. She had a glass clasped in her hand, and I expected any moment to see it exploded from the pressure of her fingers. That was the effect she had. She was beautiful. But supercharged and dangerous.

In comparison to her, the man facing her, with his hands sunk in his pants pocket, was an unhappy—as she called him—sheep. He was good-looking in a fleshy, easy-going way, double-chinned, brown-eyed, and the beginning of a pot under the bulge of his vest. The collar and leash was not apparent, but it was there all the same.

“Now, Nina,” he groaned. “The thing for us to do is call the police. There's a dead man out there in the—”

“Oh, use your head, you idiot! Suppose we called the police, and then they decided

that Jesse killed that man out there. He's fully capable of it! Where would I be? The bonds are gone, and he'd be in jail. I wouldn't have *that* much chance of collecting. These papers I hold, these patents, aren't worth a nickel to me. They're only worth something to *him* in his law suit against the Airways. I want my money, Harry. If Jesse killed that man out there, I want to be sure, so I'll have something to hold over his head for the rest of his life, and he'll pay and pay and pay. *I want evidence against him!* You're a lawyer. I'm paying you. *Get me that evidence!*”

“But Nina, if your ex-husband killed that man—”

She threw up her arms to whatever God she had, to bear witness to what she had to suffer from this fool. “Listen to me! Please, if you have any intelligence, which I doubt, use it *now!* Jesse sent me fifty thousand dollars worth of Power and Light bonds. They're gone. I want those bonds. I can re-sell them for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I *know* that Jesse had this man killed out there in the roadway and had the bonds stolen. Are you listening, Harry?”

I moved. Not much. Just a hand. But she saw it instantly. I don't think she ever missed a thing with those green cat's eyes of hers. She put her hand on Harry's arm and smiled at him.

“Forgive me, Harry. I'm upset. Do something for me, will you? That dead boy out there. Cover him with something. Put some palmetto branches over him. We'll inform the police when the time comes, but not right now. I have to think.”

She was cold-blooded enough to make you shiver, but she had Harry right where she wanted him. He protested feebly, but he went.

She came directly down the room to me. She pulled over a chair and sat regarding me. She lit a cigarette, leaned over and touched the glowing end of it to my ear. I tried to move away from it, but I couldn't.

"Sorry," she said pleasantly. "I thought you were shamming."

She went to the server and came back with a bottle of Scotch and a glass. She held my head as she poured the liquor drop by drop between my lips. She was so gentle you might almost have mistaken her for Florence Nightingale.

"Thanks," I said hoarsely. Strength was coming back.

"Better?"

Yes, better—except for a splitting head and an icy rage. I wanted to cry thinking of Jerry out there with a bullet through his head. I was going to get somebody for that.

"Now," she said, "what do you know about this? You did bring the bonds down from my ex-husband, didn't you?"

For the first time I saw the empty steel mesh bag lying on the floor by her chair, and she stirred it with her foot.

"What happened?" she demanded. "You were supposed to come tomorrow. Jesse sent me a telegram saying that you'd be here at ten P.M. on the twenty-third. . . ."

"Didn't he say Friday, the twenty-third?" I interrupted, remembering how Kuykendall had shut me up when I pointed out his mistake in the date. Friday was still the twenty-second.

She shook her head. "He merely said the twenty-third at ten o'clock."

I laughed harshly. "He meant the twenty-second."

"You're lying. He never makes a mistake like that. Unless," her eyes turned thoughtful, "he did it on purpose. He sent the police chief a telegram saying the same thing. I'll bet he had something up his . . . exactly what happened out there on the road?"

"You wouldn't know, I suppose."

"I wouldn't ask if I knew, so please don't annoy me. I dislike flip men. The next time," she held up her cigarette, "I might push this *into* your ear." She laughed. "And you'd just love to get your fingers

around my neck, wouldn't you? Don't worry, my friend, I'm not going to give you the opportunity. Now tell me how you could possibly have managed to lose the bonds."

I wasn't going to let her have a field day pushing cigarettes into my ear, so I told her, briefly, what had happened, including the amplifier up in the trees.

"That's nothing, that amplifier," she said. "Jesse had it installed when he lived here. It's an intercom between the house and the entrance to the estate. There's a mike on the tree. He could have put in a telephone just as easily, but that was too prosaic for him. But your holdup man—if there was one—must have been in front of you then. You must have seen him."

"He was behind us."

She nodded. "Of course. Jesse is clever. He would have used an extension on the mike. I actually believe you're telling the truth. . . ."

An outer door slammed, and a second later Harry ran into the room, panting.

"He's gone!" he cried. He looked as if he were about to faint.

She grimaced and said, "Oh, stop shouting, will you. Who's gone? The dead man?"

"Yes. Somebody dragged him to the car, and the car's gone, too."

She smiled. She actually smiled. "Well," she said, quite cheerfully, "that simplifies things."

HE POINTED a trembling finger at her. "I'm not going any further with this, Nina. I am going to inform the police—right now."

"Suit yourself, my dear Harry. However, I shall deny it. I shall tell the police you were drunk, as usual, and were seeing things. And they'll believe me, too. The police chief, as you know, is a very good friend."

"This man here will confirm my story!"

"What man, Harry?" she pretended not

to see me lying there on the floor. "There's no man. You're upset. Go home. Lie down. Take a sleeping powder. You'll feel much better in the morning."

"We'll see about that!" He turned and rushed hysterically from the room.

Nina Kuykendall sat perfectly still, her face cold and furious. She leaped up and ran to the fireplace, over which hung a rack of hunting rifles and seized one. She threw up the window at the far end of the room, carefully rested the rifle on the sill, and fired.

Harry screamed shrilly. She fired again. She ran out of the room.

I tried to break or loosen the rope that bound my wrists, but it bit into me like wire, though it wasn't wire. It was probably fishing line. I lay there sweating, waiting my turn.

She came back in about ten minutes without the rifle. She was not even breathing hard, and her beautiful cold face was composed. After staring at me for a moment, she went out of the room again. When she came back, she was carrying some cloths and a table knife. The sweat poured from me, but she had no intention of having two corpses on her hands. She slipped the knife blade between my teeth.

"Open up," she ordered, "or I'll break your teeth."

I opened up and she thrust a ball of cloth into my mouth, tying it in with another cloth. She noticed the way my eyes were blazing at her.

"Don't worry," she told me contemptuously, "you're not going to live long enough to do anything about it. I'll take care of you later."

She tried to drag me, but that was something else again. She didn't have the muscle for it. She straightened up and bit her lip, glancing around the room. I was lying in front of a sofa, so she dragged me around the end of it and dumped me behind. Without wasting another glance on me, she walked briskly down the room.

A dial phone whirled as she dialed a number.

"Police headquarters? Give me the Chief, please. . . . Charlie? Thank heaven you were in. Something awful has just happened out here, something entirely unforeseen. Come out right away. Alone, please! No, no. I'll tell you when you get here. . . ."

She hung up. Then I heard the clink of a bottle against a glass. Even her icy nerves needed a little reinforcement.

I lifted my tied legs and brought them down gently on the floor. The Police Chief was obviously a pal of hers—but not so much of a pal that she wanted him to find me. Good. When he walked in, I'd hammer on that floor with my heels till it boomed like a bass drum.

That brilliant idea lasted exactly two seconds. Like many of those Spanish-type houses down in Florida, the floor was made of unglazed red tile and my rubber heels bouncing against it made no more noise than if I'd snapped my fingernail against a tombstone. Less. I tried to break my wrists loose again, but the cut of that tough thin line brought the sweat out on my forehead. It would cut down to the bone before it would break. I could see it now around my ankles—white nylon fishing line, almost as tough as steel wire.

I stiffened as four shots exploded in the silence after her drink. They came from outside the house. I waited, scarcely breathing, but nothing happened. There was no other sound, no voices, nothing, and within a few minutes I heard her walk back into the room. She poured herself another drink.

Had she gone outside and put four more shots into Harry? Even nightmares weren't as horrible and crazy as this! I raged against the line around my wrists. I knew I was tearing the flesh. I could feel the greasy flow of blood, but I didn't care. Slowly the momentary insanity passed and I lay back, breathing heavily. I would have to figure out another way. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Lover Take All

IT SEEMED endless hours before Charlie came. He was young. His voice sounded young and worried.

He cried, "Nina. . ."

"Oh, Charlie! No, no, please don't kiss me now. Something . . . awful has happened. Sit down. I want to tell you about it. I feel as if I'm going crazy. You know that messenger with the bonds from my ex-husband was supposed to arrive tomorrow? We both got telegrams saying the twenty-third. He arrived tonight while I was in town. He was here when Harry and I drove in. Look, here's the steel mesh bag Jesse sent the bonds in.

"Well, as Harry and I drove up, this man ran out of the house. Harry yelled at him and the man turned and fired twice at Harry with a rifle. I don't know how he ever did it with two bullets in him, but Harry fired four times at the man. He must have hit him, because I saw him stumble just before he disappeared into the palmetto. I was terrified. I rushed in and locked the door and called you right away. . . ."

Now I understood the meaning of those four unexplained shots. Later, she meant to put four shots into me, and I would be found dead somewhere in the palmetto. Shot by Harry!

Charlie's young voice rumbled, "Did you see this other man, darling?"

"Very clearly. He was about six feet tall, had curly black hair, he was wearing a gray suit. . . ."

She went on describing *me* exactly and in detail. No Arctic blast could have been as cold as the wind that seemed to rake me. I was the next corpse, all right. She had everything planned.

Charlie's voice came slowly and heavily, "Nina . . . are you sure you didn't have anything to do with this? Remember, I

know what you had in mind for this messenger when he came."

"Oh Charlie! That was something entirely different. Jesse Kuykendall has cheated me of thousands and thousands of dollars. I was simply going to get back a little of what was rightfully mine. I'd never *kill* anybody, Charlie! I was just going to put him to sleep and take the bonds that were rightfully mine in the first place. But this . . . this. . . ."

She began to sob. I heard him murmuring comfortingly, and she said brokenly, "Please don't kiss me now, Charlie. Please . . . oh, Charlie, Charlie. . . ."

I knew, just as surely as if I had been able to see them, that she had led him into kissing her and taking her into his arms. And this hardly an hour after she had finished putting two bullets into poor old Harry!

Then I heard her saying firmly, "No, Charlie. That's enough. I blame all this on myself, darling. I wish I had never made you give me that key to Jesse's steel bag, and I should never have left it lying around so carelessly. See, it's still up there on the mantel over the fireplace. That awful man must have found it and opened the bag. Fifty thousand in negotiable bonds. No wonder he was tempted. . . ."

Oh, she wove a web around him all right, and he didn't even struggle. He was a gone goose as far as she was concerned. I felt sorry for him. Harry had been useful to her too, I suppose, and now look at Harry.

She never let anybody who could talk back hang around for long. Look at what she had planned for me!

After she had that young police chief all wrapped up and wanting to take her in his arms again, she maneuvered him outside to look at the remains. I had not the slightest doubt that within thirty minutes my description would go out on the teletype to every police headquarters in the state. She was that good.

THEY weren't out of the house two minutes, when I heard these slithering sounds, as if someone were creeping across the floor on his hands and knees toward me, and I turned my head.

I could have broken right out into tears. In fact, I did. Happy, grateful, thanksgiving tears—for there was Jerry, grin and all, creeping across the floor toward me from the doorway, that big fat Army .45 in his right hand. There was a shallow gutter of dried blood across his forehead, and it must have hurt, for his grin had a little trouble staying put.

I actually started to blubber, "Oh, kid—"

He put his finger to his lips. He cut me loose, and for about five minutes I could have danced with the pain as the circulation of blood needled back into my hands and feet, but by this time he had helped me stagger out into the big kitchen at the rear of the house. He gave me a bottle of brandy he had found in one of the closets and I took a deep pull from it. Jerry clucked around me like a worried hen.

"Gosh, Lew, you ought to see your wrists, cut to ribbons!"

I punched him affectionately on the chest. "And you should see your noggin. But what I'm really sorry for is the bullet that bounced off you. It must have screamed in agony when it snacked that solid concrete."

"Aaaah, you can't kill us Riordans, Lew. But what do we do now? I got the car hid down the other side of the bridge. What's going on here, anyway? And who's the beautiful Borgia? My God, did you see her put two slugs through her boy friend?"

"You're young yet, kid. You don't understand these things. Those were only love-shots. She was crazy about him. And you've got it all wrong. She didn't shoot him at all. I did. In thirty minutes you can ask any cop in Florida and they'll tell you the same thing."

"Let's get out of here, Lew!"

"Nix, kid, nix. If I start running now,

I'll be running till the end of my life. She's got me sewed up. What we've got to figure is a way to cut the stitches."

"She the one that held us up down there at the beginning of the road, Lew?"

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. She says she was in town with that poor old Harry character, and you can depend on it that she really was. Somebody else pulled that one. But she knew all about it. Don't ask me how I know, but I know. She was in on it. The police chief and Harry are, or were, just a pair of stooges. Dammit to all hell!" I gritted my teeth in a surge of impotent anger. "I've been set up for a sucker, and I can't see any way around!"

JERRY was standing at the window when we heard the sound of the car. He peered out into the bright moonlit night.

"There goes the police chief," he said. "She's coming back to the house by herself. Say," he pushed out his jaw, "let's you and me work on her. We've got her here alone, Lew. We'll scare the nylons off her!"

"Scare her!" I laughed bitterly. "Kid, she's tougher than you, me and anybody else you can name all rolled together. We wouldn't get a thing out of her, and on top of that I have a pretty fair idea that when it's all over the pair of us would be lying at the bottom of a six-foot hole staring straight up while they shoveled us over. Only we wouldn't know anything about it. We'd be a pair of very dead Riordans. You couldn't scare her unless you'd be willing to go all the way, and we're not tough enough for that. Could you, for instance, shove a lighted cigarette into her ear?"

He muttered, "God!"

"Yeah, and she's as tough as that," I told him. "I'm on the hook. I've got a story to tell, but nobody'll believe me. Unless I can lay those bonds on the line, together with the guy who hijacked them, even if it's Kuykendall himself."

"But Lew, I can tell them you didn't shoot that Harry character and—"

"Sure you can, and when you get all finished, if they wanted to be nice, they'd let you have the cell next to mine. Since when is one brother's word enough of an alibi for another brother? They wouldn't even bother laughing at you. They'd throw the book at you and you'd just about start recovering consciousness when they were strapping you in the electric chair on my lap. Wait a minute." I looked at him. "I seem to remember a rumor that you're a great hand with the ladies. True or false?"

"Aw, Lew. . . ."

"No. I'm serious. They say that all you have to do is show that All-American snoot of yours and strong women faint and weak ones succumb without a struggle. Right?"

"It's just a line I give them," he mumbled.

"But it works, doesn't it? How would you like to try that line out on some real competition, kid? And I'm talking about Dracula's little sister in there. Do you think you could work it? It's a chance, kid, and you'd have to watch yourself every second. What do you think? I'll be covering you."

His grin grew slowly. "It sounds like an idea, Lew."

"Okay. Now here's the idea. You walk in on her. I'll cover you from the other end of the living room. You tell her you saw her knock off that Harry character, and tell her that you know the bonds were hijacked down at the entrance of her private road. She gave the police chief a different story. At first, all you want are the bonds, then gradually work up to the point where you have her thinking that you want *her and the bonds*. Kid, if you've got that old black magic, now's the time to work it. But look, any time you feel you're not making your points, drop out. Pull out, or you'll have a knife in your back. Let me have that hunk of artillery so I can cover you. I'll have my eyes on her every minute, and I won't have any gentlemanly feeling against letting her have a slug if she asks for it."

He grinned and slipped the heavy butt of the Army .45 into my hand. He hitched up his belt.

"Duck, dames," he said, "here comes Riordan."

He slipped out the kitchen door.

I RAN lightly across the kitchen and out into the small butler's pantry that separated it from the living room. I held the door open a fraction and peered into the living room. Nina Kuykendall had stopped for a drink. As I watched, she put the glass down on the cocktail table. She looked back over her shoulder and walked swiftly down the room, knelt on the sofa and peered over the back of it. It must have been a terrific shock not to find me there, but her expression did not change by as much as the twitch of a muscle.

She crouched frozen, and then carefully pushed herself to her feet. She glanced toward the fireplace where three more rifles hung in the rack over the mantel. She walked quickly toward them. I had the door open about six inches and the sights of the .45 squarely on her right shoulder when Jerry walked into the living room through the doorway at the opposite end. He had the rifle with which she had shot Harry cradled over the crook of his left elbow. His finger was on the trigger and the muzzle was pointed directly at her. He gave her his big All-American grin.

"Hiya, sweetheart," he said. "Look what I found buried out in the sand. Uh-uh. Look but don't touch. Those nasty old guns up there might be loaded."

God! She must have had nerves like reinforced concrete! She did not even start. Turning slowly toward him, she dropped her arms from the rifles, smiling.

"Well," she murmured, "the dead man!"

"You can't kill a Riordan," he grinned. "Sit down, honeybun, I've got a little chore to do."

She sank down into the wing chair beside the fireplace. Jerry walked over and took

the rifles down from the rack. He lifted each one by the barrel and with a full-arm swing smashed each one hard against the floor.

"I hate to do this to valuable merchandise," he said, "but I've been shot at enough for one night."

"You're big," she said. "You're the biggest man I've seen in a long while."

"That's right, honeybun. Big and generous."

"Generous?"

"That's right. There are some bonds. You see, I happened to be riding along with the guy who was delivering them, so I know all about them. I'll settle for those bonds. How's about it, honeybun?"

"I don't know anything about them," she answered calmly. "They were stolen by the man who was supposed to deliver them—"

"Intercepted pass, honeybun. You'll have to try again. I found that guy tied up behind your sofa down there at the other end of the room. He didn't have anything to do with it. I've got him stashed away outside. And he didn't have anything to do with knocking off that Harry character, like you told the chief of police. So what's a few bonds between friends? You'll live a lot longer, honeybun, if you pass them over to me."

"You're mad. You're absolutely, thoroughly mad."

"That's right, honeybun," he grinned at her. "And not only that, I can get downright sore if I don't get my own way. I'm a spoiled brat."

"Do you realize that the police will be back at any moment? After all, there is a dead body out there."

"Another intercepted pass. You're just not in form tonight, are you? The cops won't be back till tomorrow. You sold that yokel chief a bill of goods, and he's going to let you discover that body all over again tomorrow. No more cops tonight. Like to try again, honeybun?"

I WAS filled with admiration for the kid. That was fast thinking, and he had hit it right on the nose. That police chief would never have left the scene if she hadn't sold him a bill of goods, and it was a good guess that he was going to let her discover the body tomorrow.

I was so wound up that I had twisted the doorknob in my hand and in my relief at the kid's answer, I let it go. It made a slight *snick* that no ordinary person would have heard three feet away—but she whirled and cried: "What was that!"

He turned. She made a grab for the barrel of his gun. She was out of that chair so fast, that she was hardly a blur, and there wasn't a thing I could do, because Jerry was between us, as big as a barn door with those shoulders of his. But there was nothing wrong with the kid's reflexes. The moment her hand touched the gun, he reversed it and bunted her under the chin with the walnut stock.

It looked like a casual, almost lazy gesture, but there must have been some muscle in it, for her head jerked back, her feet flew up and she crashed against the wing chair, collapsing on the floor, with a flash of ivory thighs above her stocking-tops, her eyes glazed. But even sprawled like that, she was lovely.

The kid looked aghast at what he had done. He had reacted automatically. He bent over her. I wanted to yell out for him to watch himself, but he was okay. He saw immediately that he had not really hurt her.

He stood his rifle against the fireplace and lifted her in his arms. He looked around unhappily, not knowing where to put her, and then he came down the room toward me and laid her on the sofa—behind which so recently I had been gagged and bound. I opened the door a little wider and gave him a warning flash, but he just winked and trotted to the server and came back with the scotch bottle and a glass. He sat on the edge of the sofa and bent over her. He was sweating.

I heard her whimper, "You hurt me. . . ."

"Your just lucky," he told her toughly, "that I didn't crack your jaw. Grab for a man's gun, and things happen to you."

I saw her slim arms come up and encircle his neck. "Kiss me!" she whispered. "Kiss me. Quickly! Kiss me!"

He bent deeper and all I could see was the hunch of his heavy shoulders. It was quite a kiss. I saw her fingers writhe, convulse and dig into the thick muscles of his neck. The kid had more than just a line. When she spoke again, she was all his.

"God!" she said huskily.

His voice wasn't quite steady either. "You're a lot of woman, honeybun."

"Kiss me again! Kiss me hard!"

Her fingers were talons, pulling him deeper and deeper into the kiss. They murmured things to each other, and if I hadn't known the kid was faking, I'd have exploded from behind that door with the gun in my fist. But even at that, I was perspiring. She was dynamite.

A LONG about four in the morning, she whispered, "I'll have to make a phone call, darling. We'll get the bonds. We'll go to South America. You will go with me, won't you?"

"I'll go with you!"

But all the same, he followed her up the room and stood between her and the rifle that he had leaned against the fireplace while she phoned, sitting in the wing chair, taking the phone from the commode beside the chair.

I could not hear a word she said, but the kid looked startled. He did not dare try to signal me at this point. They came back to the sofa, their arms around each other's waists.

"Only five hours more, darling," I heard her murmur to him as she pulled him down into the sofa as she sank into the cushions. "Kiss me again, darling. Oh, *darling!*"

I swear, never did I spend such a five hours in all my life, nor do I ever want to

spend such a five hours again. I felt like a cross between a Peeping Tom and a condemned killer waiting for zero-hour. Five hours! And I was so ashamed for having pushed the kid into this that I wanted to go away some place by myself and be sick.

In the gray and morning light, when he sat up on the sofa, he looked exhausted and bitter. He did not even glance toward the door behind which I had crouched all night. He simply let his head lay back against the back of the sofa and closed his eyes. For just about a second. He would, I am sure, have fallen asleep had she not shaken him awake, saying urgently, "Darling, darling! Don't fall asleep now. He'll be here any moment. Get the rifle and hide behind the sofa. Don't miss; Get him on the first shot!"

"Right, right," he mumbled.

She actually ran up to the fireplace and brought the rifle back to him.

My kid brother!

It was quarter to six when the doorbell rang. Jerry shambled around the sofa and knelt behind it with the barrel of the rifle resting on the back of it. She bent, kissed him swiftly, smiled and walked quickly up the room.

I opened my door and whispered, "Okay, kid?" By this time, from all that had gone on during the night, you can't blame me for not being sure.

He nodded, gave me a wan grin and tightened as she came back into the room—with Bert Campbell, Kuykendall's own attorney.

Bert was saying worriedly, "But what happened, Nina, darling?"

She evaded his arms. "Everything happened. Do you have the bonds?"

"Of course." He patted his brief case. "You told me to bring them. . . ."

And then I remembered. Back in New-ark, *he* was the one who had brought the steel mesh bag out of *his* safe, and *he* was the one who had unlocked it before the bonds were put in, and *he* had known all

about that silly timetable .Kuykendall had given me. Three days it had taken me to drive down by car. He had flown down by plane. He had the key to the bag, and he had held me up at the entrance to Nina's private road. He was just another of Nina's suckers . . .

"Thank heaven you brought them," she said. "Kiss me, darling. . . ."

He moved toward her like a starving man toward a full course dinner. She struck him on the chest with her out-thrust hands, sending him staggering backward, as she cried out to Jerry:

"Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! *Kill him!*"

I walked through the doorway with the gun in my hand at the same time Jerry rose from behind the sofa, covering both of them with his rifle.

From there on in it was something I would just as soon forget. They accused each other, they screamed; they would even have fought to lay the blame on the other—

but they had been in it together and there was no doubt of it. And in the middle of it all, the chief of police walked in on them, a very disillusioned yokel. The most horrible part of it was when she turned to him and he slapped her with a vicious backhand swing. She was done. . . .

It was a week later before Jerry and I got finished signing things in triplicate, and repeating our stories over and over again to the same hard, official faces. They were both, Nina and Bert Campbell, indicted for the murder of Harry.

It was a day after that when the kid and I stopped for a hamburger in Georgia. The cashier of the lunchroom was a very luscious blonde.

I nudged Jerry.

"She's trying to give you the eye, kid," I said.

He bit grimly into his hamburger. "Let her keep it," he said stonily. "It's probably glass." ♦ ♦ ♦

MADAME WAS ANNOYED

WHILE THERE ARE many instances of the detection of a murderer through a dream, M. Goron, one-time head of the Paris Sureté, presents that rare case in which the dreamer was a police officer.

In January, 1891, an old woman named Bazire was found strangled in her room at Vincennes, with a trunk rolled over her body. Among the neighbors questioned by M. Goron was Madame X, who lived in the room just beneath. She was most anxious to give information, and threw suspicion on an old man who collected alms for a charitable society. Experienced detectives generally suspect witnesses who are overeager, but Goron followed up her lead.

He found there was nothing to it. Several other promising leads also came to nothing.

That night Goron dreamed that Madame X was the murderer. In his dream he saw her strangle the victim with a cord, roll the trunk onto her body, and steal her clock. A dream means nothing in a court of law, but if he could get that clock . . . So he sent one of his best men to see Madame X. This detective not only got the clock, but induced Madame X to confess. She had been annoyed by Madame Bazire's rolling the trunk over the floor every morning, and by the timepiece, which was an alarm clock. So she ended the nuisance by strangling Madame Bazire.



Spike was waiting when we came
out of the woods. . . .

The Second Mistake

I made the first one when I trusted Danny Brill, and I paid seven years for my error. But he made the second—and worst mistake of all—when he let me stay alive!

I CROSSED Nashua Street and turned into Causeway. When I stopped to look into the window of a second-hand furniture store, the beefy character in the brown topcoat stood on the corner lighting a cigarette. I knew then he was tailing me.

Those Boston cops! They were hoping I'd lead 'em to the money. But I had other fish to fry. First things first. Right now I was on my way to kill a guy named Danny Brill.

I'd been doing it every day for seven

By TED JANES

long years while I rotted in the pen across the river. Hate doesn't burn itself out in seven years; it turns into a white hot flame. I'd killed Danny Brill a dozen different ways and now I was going to do it again. This time for keeps.

They'd paroled me two days ago with a new suit and fifty dollars—three years off for good behavior because they don't know what goes on in a man's brain.

"You've still got a lot of good years, Joe Martin," the warden told me. "Play it straight and keep out of trouble."

They even got me a job greasing cars in an uptown filling station—me with ninety-five grand stashed away in a tool box on the South Shore. It was only the thought of that money that had kept me from blowing my top—that, and my plans for Danny Brill. With ninety-five G's, a guy can start all over again and maybe make it grow, if he's smart. And lucky.

I ducked into North Station, dodged through the gate and climbed aboard a west-bound local. I walked the length of the train, got out the other side and cut across the tracks back into the station. When I came out on Beverly Street, the guy in the brown coat was gone.

A salty east wind crept in from the harbor, heavy with a smell of coffee, leather and spice. In spite of its chill, I was sweating as I came near the Casa Madrid, and my fingers groped for the snub-nosed .38 nestled under my arm. There could be trouble; Danny's torpedoes were never far away. Spike Crowley, watching through sleepy killer's eyes, or . . . Ginnie. If she was there maybe I'd kill her, too. I'd thought about it plenty; locking my fingers around her white throat and squeezing till her eyes popped out and her swollen face turned black. I shook a little now as I thought about it.

I turned into the door under the neon sign, cold and dead in the gray afternoon light. I went past the deserted check stand into the main room of the club. Tonight

soft lights and music would give it a synthetic gaiety, but now it looked like what it was. Still, it was a lot better joint than it had been seven years ago. Danny Brill had come a long way in seven years.

Then I saw the photo—Ginnie's photo—on an easel beside the bandstand and it was like a cold knife twisted in my guts. She had on a low cut evening dress, aglitter with sequins. It clung here and there and left her back and shoulders bare. She'd come a long way, too, along with Danny Brill.

I wrenched my eyes from the picture and stood listening. There was no one around, and breathing fast, I climbed the carpeted stairs to the mezzanine where Danny had his office.

The .38 was in my hand, my finger crooked around the trigger. I turned the knob and pushed in . . . and my luck had run out. Danny Brill was there, all right, sitting at his desk, but his staring eyes were glazed and sightless. His arms hung stiffly at his sides and a wide crimson stain spread across his shirt from a small, black hole just below the pocket. Someone had beaten my time. . . .

IN THE summer of 1944, a destroyer had steamed into drydock in Charleston Navy Yard. Boston is a good sailor's town and during the war years it was better. There was Scollay Square and the juke box joints along the waterfront; the neon-lighted honkatonk of Washington Street and the shady green of the Public Gardens. There was Jack Sharkey's Bar and the Oyster House; swanboats and walkup flats behind the Hill; Durgin Parks and the USO on the Esplanade. Whatever a guy wanted, he could find it here—liquor, a girl or trouble.

That's how it was when a cocky redhead in tight sailor pants, with his cap shoved back on his head, strolled up the Embankment on a sultry August night. Joe Martin, fireman's striker second class—me, nine years ago. I was heading for the USO, but

I never got there. I stopped off to listen to the Pop's Concert on the mall and that's when I found Ginnie.

She was sitting on a newspaper spread out on the ground with her knees drawn up in front of her, and at first, I didn't believe it. San Pedro, Panama, Norfolk, I'd been around—but I'd never seen a dame like her. Her dark hair tumbled loosely down to her shoulders. Moonlight touched the pale oval of her face and outlined her shadowy features. Her figure, molded by a cheap white blouse and short green skirt curved in all the right places. I dropped down beside her.

"Is this seat taken, baby?" I asked.

She looked at me a moment from wide, brown eyes. "On your way, sailor," she said. "Go play with the Shore Patrol."

And that's just what I did. I saw him coming across the grass, a big, husky guy as mean-looking as I felt, with a broken nose and a pair of hooks like smoked shoul-

ders. I broke his nose again and he hung a shiner on my left eye. He was wading in, swinging his club when he tripped over the walk and crashed to the ground. He didn't get up and I got out of there fast with whistles shrilling in my ears. When I stopped running, on Dartmouth Street, the girl was right behind me.

"That was crazy, sailor," she said. "They'll throw you under the brig."

"So what?" I said.

She slipped her hand in mine. "So I'd better take you home and patch you up. It was my fault, after all."

You can't figure dames and I didn't try. She took me to a cheap rooming house over by the tracks and put a poultice on my eye. She had cool hands and a quick, gentle touch.

"Why did you do it?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "I felt like it."

She nodded. "You're like me. You act first and think about it later. That's why



"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"



"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"



"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"

**YOUR HAIR'S
BEST FRIEND**

**America's
Favorite
Hair Tonic!**



BEAVER KELLER

I'm out of a job at the present time."

"Out of a job?"

"Yes. I was singing at the Silver cafe and the manager wanted me to do a number I didn't like—you know, shady stuff. I threw a chair at him and now I'm not working. It was a cheap dump, anyway."

We were sitting beside the window, watching the twinkling lights across the river merge with the stars while the rumble of traffic rose muffled out of the night. I sat looking at her a while and it had never been like this before. I put my arm around her shoulder and drew her close to me. I raised her chin in my fingers and her face was a blur in the moonlight. Then my lips were against hers hard and her arms crept round my neck.

Slowly, she drew away. "Give me a cigarette," she said shakily.

I lighted it for her and she took an awkward puff. Her eyes came back to mine, searchingly.

"Joe . . . what do you want from life?" she asked, solemnly.

"What do I want?" I'd never thought about it; a kid from the steel mill slums doesn't ask for much. "Chow. Lots of shore leave. A few laughs."

"Like this?" she said, drawing away.

"No," I said, "not like this. This is different." And I kissed her again.

She stayed nestled in my arms. "But what do you really want? Like money . . . fame . . . travel. . ."

"Listen, sister," I said, "I've had enough travel in the past two years to last me a lifetime."

She shook her head. "I don't mean that. I mean on big luxury ships to Paris . . . Hawaii . . . all the places in the magazine ads. That's what I want. And the money to go with it. That's what I'm going to have!"

She was a funny kid. "All right," I said. "If that's what you want, that's what I want, too."

I saw her every night, and we spent a

million bucks traveling around the world. Ginnie was a famous singer and I was in the chips, too, although we never figured out how I made it. Two kids in love. But we didn't have much time. Over at Charlestown they'd finished patching up the can and we were ready to shove off. Just before sailing time we got married and tried to cram a lifetime into forty-eight hours' leave because we knew it might be all we'd ever have.

After that came Anzio and the Normandy beaches and finally VE Day. A lot of our tin was shot away and some of the crew we left behind, but the rest of us sailed into Boston Harbor fourteen months after we'd gone away and Ginnie and I made up for the year we'd lost.

AT FIRST it was perfect for Ginnie and me, but I was lost, too. Three years of shooting and wondering if every day will be your last leaves a man restless and at loose ends when it's over. For months, I moved from job to job, but I couldn't settle down to just selling shoes or driving a cab. Not yet I couldn't. And as it turned out I didn't have to.

Ginnie had a job in a second-rate night club and she was doing all right. She could happy up a tune the way the customers liked it. The way the owner, Danny Brill, liked it, too.

"He's been wonderful, Joe," she told me. "He wants to meet you, too."

One night at the club she brought him over and introduced him to me. He sat down at our table and ordered drinks—a smooth, dark guy in expensive clothes—a little too smooth, maybe, and with chill gray eyes that did something to you inside.

"You've got a great girl, Martin," he said. "I hope you realize it."

"Too good for me," I said. "I haven't got much to offer her, Mr. Brill."

"Danny," he said. He held out a jeweled case. "Cigarette?" I took one and he held

out a match. "Ginnie's been telling me about you. Have you any plans, Joe?"

"Nothing definite. I've tried a few things, but I'm still not sure what I want."

He stood up and put his hand on my shoulder. "When you're ready, come around and see me," he said. "I might be able to help you."

"Go and see him," Ginnie urged. "It's our big chance, Joe. The chance we've waited for."

Danny Brill wasn't so well known then, not such a big wheel. He was a second-rater like his own night club, just muscling into the local rackets. But he was ambitious, smart and he was on the way up. That you could see. When my terminal pay was almost gone, I went to see him.

I did it with my eyes open. I knew what he wanted, a husky young guy with ice in his veins and excitement in his heart. A guy that wanted the good things of life and wanted them now. Just one thing I figured wrong.

He sat in his dingy little office, tossing a cigarette lighter from one hand to the other. "I knew you were smart," he said. "You don't play for peanuts and neither do I. Play along with me, kid. We'll go far, you and me . . . and Ginnie."

I stood up. "You've made yourself a deal . . . Danny. When do I start?"

He came around the desk. "Right away," he said. "Your first job is to take Ginnie for a week's vacation at my place on the South Shore. The kid needs it—call it a honeymoon. Just have fun and come back here a week from Monday. You're on the payroll as of now."

"This job," I said, "I'm going to like."

Danny's place on the South Shore was a rambling old farmhouse on a back road off Route 3. He even had a few chickens and a pig to add some realism to the deal, and a big ex-prizefighter called Lunk to take care of them. Lunk was punchy, but he was harmless, they said, and he took care of Ginnie and of me, too. He cooked for

us and did errands and entertained us by bending horseshoes in his hands and lifting barrels of grain over his head. Sometimes he let Ginnie feed the chickens and bring in the eggs for our breakfast. He went for Ginnie in a big way.

There was a path led through the pine woods to a sand cliff overlooking the Bay. Ginnie and I used to take a picnic lunch down to the beach and spend the day swimming and lying stretched out on the hot sand, watching the seagulls wheel overhead, planning the future. And we were getting paid for it.

"I can't believe it's true," Ginnie said, looking out across the sparkling blue water. "You and I together . . . and ahead of us all the things we've dreamed about. I'm so happy it frightens me."

It wasn't all like that. A couple of nights we woke to the sound of truck motors throbbing and low voices in the yard below our window. And one day a hard-eyed character drove up in a shiny black sedan and left again at midnight. But all that was none of my business—yet.

Then I came back and went to work. My first jobs were simple ones—picking up a suitcase from a locker in South Station or leaving a shoe box at a hole-in-the-wall jewelry store on Portland Street. That kind of thing. One by one, I met Danny's mob and came to know where each one figured—Bugs and Gil, the strong arm boys; Harry who stored the stuff in the loft above his shop; Louie the mouthpiece; Jimmie who specialized in hot cars, and the rest. It was quite an organization.

And there was Spike Crowley, a sloe-eyed killer who would gun his mother on Mother's Day. He was the trigger man, second to Danny himself. I didn't know where I fitted into the picture and then one day I found out.

It was a payroll job downtown; my first big deal. Jimmie drove the car, I sacked the chips and Spike covered me with a Tommy gun.

"This is big, kid," Danny told me. "Make it good. You'll be perfectly safe with Spike along. He'll take care of you."

We spent a week casing the spot and rehearsing the job and it went off without a hitch. Particularly for Danny. He fixed it so the rest got away and left me stranded. Then he tipped off the cops to pick me up. He wanted Ginnie and my cut of the money. And Ginnie wanted him; I could see it now. That's what I'd figured wrong.

But Danny made one mistake, too. He had Ginnie, all right, but I had the money. And I kept it. I got out of town ahead of the cops and headed south. The state police grabbed me at the Rhode Island border, but not till I'd stashed the money away in the last place the mob would think of looking for it—in the pine woods back of Danny Brill's farm.

I kept my mouth shut. It wouldn't have done any good to talk, and, besides, I wanted to handle this my way. So for seven years I sat in jail . . . waiting. . . .

I STOOD in the office door, staring at Danny Brill and he was a very expensive-looking corpse. His dark blue suit was right out of the magazines and his blood was soaking a fifty-dollar shirt. I knew now why the club had been deserted. Somebody'd planned it that way. Who, I wondered . . . who'd done him in . . . and why? I was still standing with one hand on the door knob and the other gripping the .38 when I heard sirens screaming up the street.

It wasn't a good spot for the parole board to find me. With footsteps pounding across the main lounge I slipped out Danny's private back door and sprinted up the steps to the roof. I knew my way from there—across the ledge to the apartment house and down the fire escape into a narrow, cobblestone alley. I saw the convertible as I raced down the iron ladder, heard the throb of its engine, but I paid no attention till a voice called: "Joe!"

I went over to the car on rubber legs and stared into Ginnie's face. Seven years had done things to her, polished her hard and bright like a diamond. They'd come up together, she and Danny—while I'd rotted in jail. But seeing her again, the feeling I'd once had for her came over me again like a fever.

"Get in!" she cried. "Quick!"

"No thanks," I said. "You took me for one ride."

Tears came in her voice. "Get in, Joe," she pleaded. "You've got to!"

I didn't want to, but I couldn't help myself. I knew it was crazy, but the cops would soon be coming. I climbed in beside her. Anyway, I still had the gun. Before I shut the door, she had the car in gear, splashing through the muddy alley.

She turned into Hanover Street and I saw the crowd surging around the Casa Madrid. She cut across Scollay Square and threaded into Beacon Street, her face a scared, tight mask. I sat looking at her, trying to figure the angles while she jockeyed the five o'clock traffic out of town. Then, all at once, without looking at me, she said:

"I . . . I'm sorry for all that's happened. It was all my fault—like the first time I thought he was on the level, Joe. I swear it. . . ."

"Sure," I said, because it hurt and I didn't want to talk about it.

"I got what I deserved, too. Me and my big ideas. But I want you to know that there was never anything between Danny and me. There's never been anyone but you, Joe."

I looked at her expensively simple brown dress and her alligator bag and shoes and I laughed.

She followed my glance.

"I got 'em singing, Joe," she said. "The club has come along and Danny kept me around to have a line on you when you came out. And I stayed to watch him. I've hated him for seven years . . . as much as

you've hated him. Sometimes I've thought I'd kill him."

I thought about that and it figured. "How come you were parked so conveniently in the alley?" I asked her when we'd left Kenmore.

"I saw you go into the club," she said. "I knew it was no use trying to stop you . . . and I knew what you were going to find."

"Then you. . . ."

She shook her head. "No, I didn't do it," she said dully. "I went in there and found him."

"But who—"

"The same one who called the cops—Spike Crowley."

I laughed "Crowley calling the cops! Now I've heard everything."

"Not quite," she said. "Do I have to draw a diagram? Crowley knows you're out. He wants that money. He saw a chance to get rid of Danny and frame his killing on you. Then he'll take over."

Ice caked around my heart and I realized suddenly that losing the cop in the brown coat hadn't been so smart after all. If what Ginnie said was true, I was in a jam up to my eyeballs. Spike Crowley was worse than Danny Brill; a senseless, killer animal. I had to get that money and lam—fast. But it was all too pat and I was scared.

"Where are you going now?" I demanded.

"I'm taking you home—to my apartment."

"Oh, no, you're not," I said. "Stop the car. This is where you came in."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got a date with ninety-five grand," I said. "I've earned it. Then I'm going far and fast—alone."

"You can't do that!" she gasped. "You can't, Joe. Don't you see—that's what he wants you to do. If you run away they'll think you're guilty."

"If I stay here I'll be dead," I said. "I

can run faster than the cops, faster than Crowley—and the world is wide. Remember Hawaii and Paris, all those places in the magazine, honey? Stop the car!"

She only pressed down harder on the gas. "The money's no good to you dead," she said. "It's no good to you anyway now."

I pulled out the .38 and shoved it into her side. "Stop the car or I'll let you have it, baby."

"You'd do it, too," she said. "I won't let you kill yourself." And she pulled up beside the road.

"Now get out."

"I won't get out," she said, quiet and still. "You can shoot me now if you like, Joe."

I didn't shoot her; I couldn't. I slapped her hard across the mouth and she sat there, taking it. I could have beaten her and she wouldn't have got out. There was no time to argue. I dragged her across the leather upholstery and climbed over her behind the wheel. Then I put the accelerator on the floor board heading for Danny Brill's farm.

"And if this is the way I think it is," I warned her savagely, "I'll break every bone in your beautiful body."

I DIDN'T drive into the farmyard. I stopped the car a couple hundred yards down the road and cut across the fields under a bright full moon. A light burned in the kitchen window, but everything was quiet. I found a spade in the shed and together Ginnie and I took the path through the pines that we'd followed so many times before.

This time, though, it was different. This time a sick hurt was in my heart—a hatred and a clammy fear that soaked my shirt to my back. I wanted her to be telling the truth, but I just couldn't be sure she really was.

"When I'm finished here, I'm going to leave you with Lunk," I said. "He'll get you back to town."

"I don't care what happens to me now, Joe," she said.

It was darker in the woods, but I knew where I was going. I'd been there a thousand times in my mind—left at the dead pine, fifty paces in to the blazed tree under which I'd put the cash. The spade made a soft clinking sound as it bit into the sandy soil. The box was there, just as I'd left it, and my knees buckled a little as I bent and tugged it loose from the sand—the moment I'd dreamed about for seven long years. It didn't last long.

Spike was waiting when we came out of the woods, an automatic in his fist and a hungry look in his cold snake eyes.

"Okay, punk," he said, "this is the end of the line." His hand slid under my coat and came away with the .38. "You're a wild man with a car, Martin. I thought a couple of times I'd lost you. You might kill somebody."

"I wish I had," I said bitterly.

He laughed. "Seven years is a long time to wait. It was too long for Danny. But he wasn't very bright. If he had been he wouldn't have knocked himself out trying to get to first base with a dame that hated his guts."

I felt something let go inside me—something hard and jagged that had been there for seven years. Standing at the edge of the shadowy woods with the moonlight glinting on a pistol aimed at my chest, those were the sweetest words I ever heard.

"Now Danny's dead," Spike said, "and the cops will be looking for Joe Martin. But don't worry—they'll never find him. Where you two are going, the cops will never bother you again."

I didn't recognize the voice that croaked out of my dried-up throat. "You can't get away with it, Spike."

"Shut up, punk," he grated. "I haven't waited all this time for nothing. I've figured all the angles. Danny gets himself bumped off and you and the dame disappear. Even the cons can figure that one."

"Somebody'll hear you shoot."

"Are you telling me my business? Not in the house, they won't. Then Lunk will toss you in the truck and dump you off the causeway, all sewed up with burlap and weights. He's done it before."

He herded us into the farmhouse kitchen where Lunk sat at the table playing solitaire with a pack of greasy cards. He looked up as we came in, and a slow light of recognition struggled into his dull blue eyes.

"Joe," he said, heaving himself to his feet. "And Ginnie. Where did—"

"Cut it, Lunk," Spike snapped. "Get a couple of sacks and some leads and bring 'em down cellar. Then back the truck up to the door. I got a dumping job for you."

"Dumpin' job . . . what's the . . ."

"Shut up!" Spike gestured with the automatic. "Do like I say and hurry it up. I ain't got all night."

Lunk stood in the middle of the floor, looking uncertainly from Spike to Ginnie and me.

"I don't take orders from nobody but Danny," he said sullenly.

"You do now," Spike rasped. "Danny's dead. I'm the big wheel now."

The big guy's eyes widened. "Danny . . . dead!" His head swung loosely toward Ginnie and me. "Is . . . is it true?"

Ginnie nodded. "Spike did it, Lunk," she said softly. "Spike killed Danny."

You could see the red hate filter into Lunk's eyes as he swung ponderously to face Spike again. Spike saw it, too. He took a backward step, his gun faltering toward Lunk's chest, his tongue flicking dry lips.

"Get back, you big ape, or I'll kill you, too—get back!" His voice broke in shrill fear as Lunk swayed forward in a hulking shuffle.

At the blast of the automatic, Lunk stopped short as though he'd walked into a stone wall. A surprised look came into his broad face as a slow, dark stain spread across his flannel shirt. Then he moved in

again. His big hands grasped Spike's neck in a crushing grip and I heard the bones crunch sickeningly in the stillness. When he let go, Spike slid sprawling to the floor. Lunk gazed around at us in a slow, uncomprehending stare. Then he toppled to his knees and pitched forward across Spike's body.

Ginnie buried her face against my shoulder, clinging to me hysterically. "Lunk!" she sobbed brokenly.

I stood looking down at his tired, gentle face and then after a while my eyes went to the rusty box on the floor where Spike had set it. I carried it to the table and pried it open.

"It's here, Ginnie," I said. "Money to buy all the things you wanted—to take us to the places you've always dreamed of."

She stood beside me, looking at the packets of crisp bills. "I don't want it any more," she said. "Any of it. All I want is you, Joe."

And, suddenly, I didn't want it, either. It was blood money; it had killed three men already.

I closed the cover on all that cash and turned away.

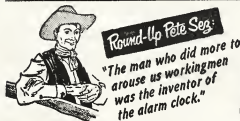
We left it there in the farmhouse kitchen with the two dead men to guard it. We notified the state cops where to find it and where to find Danny Brill's killer as well. Then we drove back to Ginnie's apartment—our apartment now.

Tomorrow I'd take the job the parole board had found for me and we'd live on it through all the good years ahead. There was one thing I couldn't figure, though, and I mentioned it as we drove through the soft June night.

"Lunk," I said. "I wonder why he did it."

Ginnie moved closer to me in the darkness.

"Because," she said, "Lunk was Danny's brother." ♦ ♦ ♦



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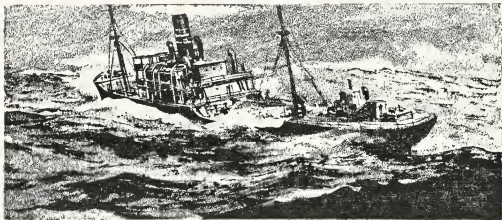
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MURDER SHIP!

Nobody knew where the ship was bound, or why, and nobody cared. For a crew of murderers, cut-throats and thieves know well there is only one last Port of Call for them: The harbor of hell!

A HEAVY, continuous rain sluiced off the awning over the newsstand as I ducked under to get a paper. I picked up a *Chronicle*, gave the man a nickel, and moved away from the counter to have a quick look at the Help Wanted section. The rain splashed wet on my soaked shoes and pants as I opened the paper.

The Embarcadero was only a block away, but in the rain it might as well have been in Manila for all I could see of it. I ran through the ads. There was one: *Wanted: Masters, mates, engineers, seamen*. The address was Fifth and Mission, but there was



For the first time in the voyage, Starbuck was Master of his own vessel.



By JOHN HAVILAND

no phone number. I'd get well soaked walking there in this, but there was nothing else to do, and no point in waiting for the rain to stop. Not in January; and cabs cost money.

I found the address, turned in the doorway and slopped up a flight of dingy stairs to the second floor. I walked down the dark hall past a couple of doors with paint flaking off the panels. Around a turn there was an open door with light inside and voices. I walked into the room with the paper in my hand. There was a fat guy with curly dark hair there, sitting at a table in front of maybe a dozen characters like me: wet, carrying a banner, and needing a shave.

The guy at the table was handing out mimeographed forms. I moved squishing toward him and held out my hand. He gave me one, and looked around the room like a man does who knows he's master.

"Fill these out," he said, "and leave them here. We'll get in touch with you."

We stood around the room, writing with stubs of pencil, holding the forms against the dusty wall. They had the usual places for name, date and place of birth, nationality, employment record, and so forth. There was one: *Have you ever been charged with or convicted of a crime, felony, or other offense?* I hesitated, then wrote *No*.

"All you men be sure to give an address and phone number where you can be reached, or where you can get messages," the man at the table said. "Some of you'll be hearing from me in about a week."

"Nuts," the man next to me muttered. He was a big fellow, past his prime, with graying hair, the red face of the drinker, and a touch of sullenness. "Cheap rats," he went on in a low voice. "Never get anything out of them. Fly-by-nights if I ever saw any."

"How's the shipping here?" I asked. "Lousy in New York."

He laughed humorlessly. "What the hell do you think goes on here? Damn com-

panies full of hometown boys and punks that never leave a ship once they get on it."

"Yeah, that's the way it goes."

We'd finished the forms, and he turned to the man on the other side of him, a long skinny son of a gun who looked fit for murder either way. "Come on, Ole, let's get the hell outta here." Ole grunted and turned toward the table. We dropped the forms in front of the big guy and started out of the room.

"Well," the red-faced man said, "see you in some ginmill, some time or other, most likely." He paused outside the doorway and stood looking at me. "Take a tip, young feller. Get the hell away from these ships and stay away. You're young enough to start doing something else."

OUTSIDE, the rain poured down on the the gray windowpanes. The steady drumming was a soporific. I was tired and there was no place to sleep.

"Yeah, but that's a big order." I remembered the times I'd tried to break away and failed—and the one time I'd succeeded. Now I was back again, and two people were dead three thousand miles away. "Once you start, you come ashore to look for something else, you go broke, then you go back to sea again, and while you're out, if there ever was anything else, it turns up, and you aren't there. . . ."

"Don't tell me," he said, "I've had it too long. . . ." His eyes narrowed, and there was a downward twist to the corners of his mouth.

"What's your grade?" I asked. He didn't answer, and I knew. "Master?"

He nodded slow. "Master." He looked past me. "But I'd take anything I could get."

Ole shuffled impatiently. "Come on, Jack." The two walked off down the corridor ahead of me. When I came down to the street, they were moving off through the gray rain, and just before they disappeared in it, they turned off into a bar.

It was late in the afternoon. I was cold, wet, tired, hungry. *Try the mission, I thought. If I can find a place to lie down and maybe get these wet clothes off and crawl in and die for twelve hours, that will be the best thing that could happen to me.*

That was Monday.

Friday night, after I'd turned in, the mission's night man woke me. "You Joseph Larsen?"

"Maybe."

"Phone. Maybe ship for you." He walked off between the rows of cots and I dressed quick and clumped after him. The clock on the counter said twelve-thirty. I picked up the phone. "Larsen," I said.

"I have a ship for you." The voice was efficient and commanding, "If you still want out as second mate."

"I still want out."

"OK. Got your gear handy?"

What gear? I thought. Well, I still owned a sextant. "Yeah," I said.

"Pier thirty-two, Embarcarero. Right away. The *Perseus*. Captain Starbuck and Olson, the mate, are aboard."

"Where's she bound for?"

There was a little hesitation, then a crisp, "Far East. Better save the questions and make it quick, Larsen."

"Okay, Mac." I hung up. The night man was looking over the counter at me. "Hell of a time to make a pierhead jump," he said.

"Any time is a hell of a time to ship—ever. Gimme me my sextant."

He reached up to a shelf behind the counter and lifted the sextant down. "Gintime the check." I gave it to him. "Luck, man," he said, giving me a straight look.

"Yeah, thanks," I said.

"Okay, Jack," he said, "see you back in the mission after this one. I'll save a bunk for you." He winked at me. I winked back at him. He reached into his shirt pocket, took out a fresh-opened pack of cigarettes and tossed it to me. I caught it and wanted to throw it back. My hand drew back, and

then I changed my mind and put the pack in my pocket.

"Thanks," I said. I walked out with the sextant box hanging on a couple of fingers while I reached for a cigarette and wondered if there was a match in any pocket.

It took me half an hour to walk to the pier. I slanted up the rickety plank that did for a gangway. The ship—what there was of her—was battered down and secured for sea. A bad ship, not over a couple of thousand net, maybe forty or fifty years old and falling apart from rust and neglect. Looked like she'd been built a while back by Greeks or Yugoslavs for Mediterranean service.

I went amidships, climbed a ladder to the boat deck, and went into the starboard passageway. Dingy little rooms outboard with no brassplates over the door telling what rates lived in them, and the passageways not wide enough for two broad men to pass.

I heard footsteps on a ladder forward; then we were two broad men in the passageway, face to face. He stopped six feet in front of me, hooked his thumbs in his bulging belt and looked at me out of the coldest, hooded, dark eyes I ever saw. He wore a beat-up high pressure cap, and under it was a wax-white face, full, with the blue-black of fresh-shaven beard under the skin like licorice in a cellophane wrapper. He was built round and wide, but he didn't look soft. He seemed to be daring me to open my mouth first.

For maybe ten seconds I gave him my own version of this eye-business, then I leaned against the bulkhead and lit another cigarette. I held the pack out to him. He didn't look at it. Not a muscle moved, but the hooded dark cruelty in his eyes burned with a chillier flame.

"What's up, Jack?" I said, blowing smoke at his face. He was pretty far away, but some of it got to him. The eyes blanketed—not pierced me—with barely restrained ferocity. There was an odd quality

to this malevolence; it was so impersonal.

"Up?" he said, and the voice was soft and high. His lips barely moved as he spoke. "Wise guy, if you're the second mate, get up to the Old Man's room and listen. . . . That's your room aft there." He motioned toward the first room I'd passed, then turned and went back up the ladder. I followed him, turning forward at the top, then three steps along the passageway, and into the Old Man's room.

THERE were eight men in the room.

One of them was the red-faced guy who'd spoken to me at the place where we'd filled out the forms. Another was the skinny son of a gun called Ole. These two must be Captain Starbuck and Olson, the chief mate. Then there was the fat guy with the curly dark hair who'd passed out the forms. He was the one with the crisp note of command in his voice and manner. He and two others were dressed like respectable shore-side citizens, but the rest of us were clearly seamen. The fat guy sat at the Captain's desk, with the other two and one of the seamen, the radio operator, flanking him as if it were them against us.

"Well," he said, then closed his mouth and looked around, his eyes touching each of us for a second. The crisp voice went on. "You men have been specially selected." He paused again and a slight smile curved his lips. "But more of that later. For the present I'll tell you that you're taking a cargo of food, machinery, and medical supplies to a certain port in the Far East. Manila, let's say. That's where we're cleared for, anyway . . . but it makes no difference. You officers will take your orders from Captain Starbuck, and he will take his orders from us."

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ash tray, looking down at it. "And now, just so there will be no misunderstandings, I'll explain the way you *men*—" there was contempt in his voice when he said the word—"were selected. The first require-

ment was that each of you have a criminal record."

His words seemed to come from a great distance. "You see, we find things out. Captain Jack Starbuck, meet your officers. You know Olson, of course—old partners, eh? Larsen," he mentioned toward me, "your second mate; and as fine a specimen of uncaught murderer as we could find."

It was like a thunderclap inside my skull. Starbuck looked at me without recognition, and Olson didn't even look. "And your third mate, Rifkin. . . ." He looked over at the burly fellow with the waxy skin who'd blocked me off in the passageway below. Rifkin stared back at him with a cold unblinking malignance that made me shiver. This was brutality such as I'd never seen before.

Rifkin's lips said, "Yeah," and it was flat and deadly and promised quick efficient violence when he wanted, but no hurry, Jack, it seemed to say, I wait, and the longer I wait the more you suffer, because you never know when it's coming.

I think the guy at the desk missed this essential quality of Rifkin. He was too preoccupied with tasting the flavor of his own authority. He went on, "And the chief engineer, the bosun, the steward and their staffs are the same."

Starbuck was looking straight at the man from his position on the settee. The captain leaned back, deliberately untensing. He might have been stewed five minutes ago, but he was sober now. "So, Mr. Crimp—I beg your pardon—Mr. Bastetti, perhaps you would go into detail about your own record. . . ."

Bastetti looked back at him, raised an eyebrow, and flicked ash from his cigarette. His smile was cool. He couldn't have known what crimp meant. "Ah . . . no, *Captain*, we all have our little secrets, shall we say? Perhaps they will come out in due time. But, in any case, I have made yours my business. And mine are none of yours—and this is why. . . ."

He reached inside his coat and pulled out a snub-nosed revolver, laying it on the table in front of him. He looked up at the radio operator. "Mr. Flynn." Flynn pulled a pistol from his pocket just far enough to show it. He was a thin young man, pale and freckled, serious-looking, almost ascetic, with thick-lensed glasses behind which his eyes were like dim-swimming oysters.

"Mr. Murphy." One of the citizens, a middle-aged man with kinky red hair and big ears, showed his pistol. "Mr. O'Brien." This one must have been the heavy-duty character among them. He was as big as Rifkin or myself, and had the manner of a trained ape as he showed his pistol.

"Now," Bastetti said, "go to your stations, all of you, and get this ship under way, right now."

"Pilot's not aboard," Starbuck said, his voice betraying surprise.

"We're taking no pilot. Get this ship away from the dock."

Starbuck flicked a glance at Olson. "Go forward, Ole, and get the gang out." He turned to me. "Stand by aft." As I went out I heard him tell Rifkin to test the whistle, telegraph, and steering gear.

I WAS back on the fantail waiting for the gang to show. I could see Bastetti standing in the wing of the bridge beside Starbuck. *God*, I was thinking. *I didn't do it—I never killed anybody*. But that's what they all say. Somebody even wrote a prison song about it. *I didn't do it*, was one of the lines. The louse had it coming to him, and I'd had a motive, and there were those two characters who stated that I'd promised to do it. But somebody got to him before I did, the alarm went out, and I took off without waiting for anything. Maybe not so smart, I was thinking now.

Three figures straggled up the ladder to the fantail. I felt lower than I'd ever been. "Okay," I said, "let go the spring."

The dock hand threw off the eye and the winch clattered so loudly I thought a steam

line would burst right now. Then the eye came through the chock and dragged across the deck. Starbuck signaled from the bridge and I threw a sternline off the bitts. The bite slacked down into the cold bay, and the eye flopped off the dock after it. Again the winch heaved noisily, threatening collapse. *God*, I thought, *if I could crawl into my bunk and die for eight hours or forever*.

The main engine turned over as the last line cleared, and the flood tide took the ship away from the dock, easy at first, then rushing. She just barely cleared the pier-head downtide before she got into the stream. The heaps of line lay on the deck like sleeping serpents, and inside my head there was also a serpent. O'Brien looked at me and moved his hand in his pocket.

I turned to an able seaman, a burly grizzled man in his fifties with a scar like a sickle curving from temple to jaw. "Stow the lines." He nodded, swung down the ladder to the well-deck, and grabbed methodically at an eye. The other two joined him and they began to march back and forth in the dark rain, carrying bites of line like a daisy chain to the hole over the lazarette and feeding it down in.

O'Brien never took his eyes off me. Every time I glanced at him he moved the hand in the pocket. It was two-thirty.

"My watch," I said.

He looked at me, not understanding.

"I go to the bridge. Relieve the third mate."

"Go ahead. You know your job. Do it. I don't interfere with that."

Rifkin was standing by the telegraph. He glanced at me briefly. "Yours," he said. The dim glow from the side of the telegraph lit his chin, nose, and brow, and the malign eyes were opaque in the shadow under the brow. He went out and lay below.

The radar scope showed pips of light where there were ships and shore and buoys and marks. Treasure Island and the bridge showed long flashes abaft the starboard beam. You wouldn't expect to find radar

in a rust-bucket like this, but there it was.

"Full ahead," Starbuck said. I threw the telegraph, and the bells sounded below as the engine room answered. The engine beat began to pick up, and in half a minute I could feel a good seventy-five revolutions. Must have a new engine in her, too.

"Come left," Starbuck said to the quartermaster. The lights up the bay began to swing across the bow and Alcatraz showed a dim hump on the starboard bow. I felt better when it was abaft the beam and I didn't have to look at it. Then we were under the Golden Gate, and the lights of the Presidio slid by to port and we were clear of the bay. The ship met the first of the long Pacific swells and the deck lifted under my feet and I saw the others sway to it.

Olson took over from me at four when the lights of the city were falling below the horizon astern, and ahead there was only the Pacific Ocean, with the range-lights of a few inbound ships coming up and the lights of the Farallons below the curve of earth half a hundred miles westward.

Starbuck was taking his departure bearing from the last light off the gyro repeater, another fancy piece of gear to find on this rusted hulk. Bastetti leaned against the wind-screen watching him, and as I moved past him on my way below he spoke. "Larsen, you can pass the word that there'll always be one of us here, so don't worry yourselves about that."

I looked at him for a second as Starbuck paused on his way to the chart room. "That's for you, too, Captain."

Starbuck moved on his way and I went below, glancing in as I passed the radio shack porthole. Flynn sat with his feet placed precisely under the drop-leaf of his transmitter and was reading a pamphlet. I couldn't make out the title over his shoulder, but I thought I saw the word: *Party*.

I moved away from the port and stepped over the fish-plate into the passageway and went into my room. There was a bare mat-

tress on the bunk, and blankets and a pillow piled on a chair. As I stood looking at them, the ship's motion caused them to slide, and the pillow fell to the deck. I watched as the blankets followed. Then I picked them up, made the bunk roughly and crawled in. Half a minute later I'd forgotten even the worst of it.

CHAPTER TWO

Match For a Mate

THE ordinary seaman called me at eleven-fifteen, just before lunch. I didn't wake easy. I'd been dreaming of waking in my bed at home, under the shingled eaves with the blossoming apple bough across the window and the Kennebec glinting bright in the May sun. Reality was like a bucket of swill in my face. I got up, groggy and wanting never to get up.

The last thing I'd dreamed of was the smell of coffee and bacon floating up the stairs and the sound of Bess moving around in the kitchen and the kids tumbling out to go to school. The small room here with the paint flaking off the bulkheads, and the porthole, and the miserable bunk gagged me.

They say, "Once to sea always at sea," and, "go to sea for pleasure—go to hell for a pastime." But after five years I'd licked it. Had a good string of lobster pots, boat-livery for summer people, and a wood-working shop that took care of us all with plenty to spare.

Now Bess was dead, the kids were with my mother, and here I was. Here, because the swine who'd caused Bess' death was dead himself, and I might as well have been the one who killed him. At least I'd have had the satisfaction, and it wouldn't have been a small satisfaction, either. You might think that one used car dealer more or less was a matter of small importance, but not this one. If there had been one less before he had a chance to come to Little Kenne-

bec, I'd still have been there, with everything as it was.

I went below to the saloon, drew a cup of coffee from the urn and drank it quickly. Then I drew another one, took it back to my room, lit a cigarette, and sat on the bunk. Funny there hadn't been anyone in the saloon. Looked like there'd be no socializing for the crew of the *Perseus* this trip. Bastetti probably had planned it that way.

A half grown little tiger cat put his head in the door, looked me over, came in, and jumped lightly on to the bunk. I scratched its ears, and it purred and rubbed against me. *You don't pick good ships, do you, cat? Like some sailors.*

My watch said eleven-fifty and I went to the bridge to relieve Rifkin. I glanced into Starbuck's room as I passed. He and Olson sat, one on the settee, the other at the desk, with a bottle between them. They looked as if they'd been there for hours.

I stepped into the wheelhouse as Rifkin came in from the wing. It was raining hard and he stood there in his oilskins dripping water on the deck. "Nothing," he said in his high voice, moving closer. "Old man's a lush. So's the mate. Been hittin' the sauce ever since Olson came off watch."

I nodded. "How's she heading?"

"Two-seven-seven. No moon. . . . She's doing a good sixteen."

That really startled me. For a moment, I wondered if they'd taken the main engine out of the *Queen Mary* and put it below. This rusty hull couldn't take too much of that speed.

I moved closer to the radar scope and noted a pip eight miles off on the starboard bow. "He'll pass couple of miles off," Rifkin said, looking at the pip.

Murphy was standing just outside the wheelhouse door, watching us closely. Ignoring him competely, Rifkin went below, soaked through his oilskins. Funny thing about some deck officers. They can't learn to trust the radar. When the visibility is zero, they'll stand out in the wing trying

to see a foot in front of their noses—when the radar can tell them all about everything clean to the horizon and all around. There are skippers who'll turn the radar off and chase the mate outside in a rainstorm that's driving so hard he can't even face it with his eyes open. Some people never learn anything and never forget anything.

I didn't have any oilskins, and if I had, I wouldn't have put them on. I leaned against the forward bulkhead, from where I could see the radar easily, as well as keep an eye ahead and listen to the ship's noises. I stayed there for maybe an hour without moving. The sea was nearly flat. There was the gray wall all around the ship, the hissing and drumming of the rain, and the sound of the wheel turning as the quartermaster steered his course.

"How's she steering?" I said.

"Good." He was the able seaman with the sickle scar. "Fast ship always steer good."

"Check gyro against steering compass every once in a while. Sometimes gyro goes haywire, and all of a sudden you're fifty degrees off your course."

He grunted acknowledgement.

The steward put his head in the wheelhouse. "Slopchest open three-thirty to four-thirty."

Then Bastetti came in. He gave me the once over, then went to where Murphy stood in the corner. There was low-voiced conversation for half a minute. Murphy had straightened up and stood at attention while Bastetti spoke, then in obedience to what had evidently been an order, he opened the door and went out into the pouring gray rain. Bastetti looked out the window for a moment, then went below.

I walked over to the port hole and looked out. Murphy stood there like a cow in the rain, soaked through and looking straight ahead and trying to keep his eyes open. He must have been almost fifty years old and verging on senility. The marks of muscular degeneration were beginning to

show. I opened the door. "What the hell are you standing out there for?"

He turned his head and looked at me, with the rain streaming down his puffy face, not saying anything, then looked away again. I shook my head and closed the door.

IT WAS quiet then for maybe half an hour until the Old Man wandered in. He was drunk as hell, but holding it. He looked at the scope, but his eyes wouldn't focus, so he put his face down close and pointed his finger waveringly at the pip. "Wha's a'?" His lips were so stiff they wouldn't move as he spoke.

"Ship, cap'n. Came up on the eight-to-twelve. Abeam now and Eastbound." I put my head down beside his. "'Bout five miles off."

"Wuunnerful gadget, radar." He hicced quietly and moved to the forward porthole, and he wasn't too unsteady on his feet. He looked out at the curtain of rain and the few visible yards of sea ahead and to starboard. "Radar . . . 'at's wha' I shoulda had fifteen years ago . . . always was a hard luck character."

His breath misted the glass two inches in front of him. "When 'ey get one s'rike on you, second comes sooner 'r later, 'en third . . . 'f you're smart, you quit when you see the first one comin' at you . . . 'f you *can* see it comin'. But I was'n even smart 'nough to quit after the third one. I'm still here . . . still swingin' at that third one that went by fifteen years ago. Can't stop swingin' . . . bad habit I gotta break some day" He looked bleary at me. "Don't know good psychologis', d'ye?"

I shook my head. "Maybe your timing's a little off. Dannn pitchers in this league are meaner than hell. Ready to stop swinging any day myself."

"Must a switched leagues on me . . . never sailed with a gun in my ribs before. . . ." He looked at me. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

I started. The question seemd ominous.

Then I remembered and nodded. "Hiring hall. This outfit's, I mean."

He didn't seem to remember. "Damn Olson. Gashound. Conked out in my bunk. Better not catch him drunk on watch . . . hope nobody catches me. . . ." He turned away from the port, moved aft to the door of his room and went in. "Gotta stop swingin'," he said, closing the door behind him.

I looked at the clock. Two. I hoped that Olson would be on his feet by four, or I'd be stuck. Murphy had come in from the wing, kindness of Bastetti, and he stood in the corner, a dripping fixture. The quartermaster, his hands on the wheel, was a graven image with a scar on his face. Outside, the rain never varied its beat. The pip on the radar scope showed well astern, and I knew that the ship was as beyond communication with the world as a wandering planet whose orbit might never come perigee again.

At four, Olson came into the wheelhouse, bleary-eyed and hiccupping, but apparently compos. "Okay, boy," he said, "I got 'er."

It was still raining heavy and thick when I got my gear from the slopchest and went to my room. I took a bath and shaved and crawled into the sack.

The pattern stayed much the same for the days that followed. The rain stopped the next day and the weather turned cold and foggy, and often it blew like hell out of the Northwest, dead against us as we fought across the great circle. As we crept nearer the Aleutians, the clear days were fewer.

Starbuck and Olson were never sober, and Bastetti's detail was like a well-disciplined squad under a sergeant. None of them ever laughed or treated each other like human beings. There was no unnecessary talk. They were almost ascetic in their dedication and discipline. They were just there, watching, like machines designed to detect a particular kind of behavior and indicate its presence as radar shows an ob-

stacle in the path of a ship. Bastetti alone showed individuality and inclination to cat-and-mouse cruelty.

ONE morning, about a week after we'd left San Francisco, I came off watch at four o'clock and couldn't sleep for the first time since joining the ship. Before, I'd wanted to lose consciousness as often and long as I could. Olson was on the bridge with Bastetti, and Murphy, O'Brien and Flynn were asleep.

I sat on the hatch on the after welldeck with my back against the mast, thinking. The hatches had been battened down so carefully that opening one would be a big job. I got up and went looking. The cat followed me. Damn thing seemed to have adopted me; it was either in my room, curled up in my sack, or following everywhere I went. . . .

In the passageway outside the galley there was a manhole, but it was too conspicuous. I found four others, all the same. There was a watertight door through a bulkhead below the midship quarters, but it was sealed tight, welded. In the passageway on this deck were the doors to the refrigeration compartments. Ordinarily, they were locked, but I'd noticed that the steward and the cooks had gotten careless about sealing them at night. One was open, and I went in.

I pulled the door to behind me, after pushing the cat back outside. I lifted up a grating and there was the manhole cover bolted down with about twenty big bolts. I put the adjustable wrench on them and they came off easy. I lowered myself through the hole, found the ladder with my feet, and pulled the grating back over the hole. If anyone took a quick look, he might not see the open hole under the grating.

I walked forward through a dark, low passageway and came out against the cargo in number two lower hold. Big wooden cases were stowed solid right up to the 'tween decks. I held my hand over the

flashlight lens, letting a sliver of light through my fingers, and studied the markings. Medical supplies off in the wings, emergency rations under them. I pulled a screw driver out of my pocket and pried loose the end of a board from a case marked *Medical Supplies*.

There was a lot of loose crumpled paper, some of which I pulled out, and there was more underneath. I reached as far as I could through the depths of crumpled paper and hit something hard. I recognized bolts, then wires, then small round pipes, all covered with protective lubricant. I pushed the paper aside and shined the light inside. Machinery of some kind. Then the light showed a tag. I put the paper back and replaced the board.

I climbed up the ladder and paused under the hole to look up through the grating. There was nothing to be seen, except for the dimlit overhead of the compartment. Then I heard Bastetti's voice.

He moved into view beside the hole and stood there looking at me, nodding his head. "I wondered what that cat was doing down here in the passageway. Come up." I came up. "Now bolt that cover down tight. . . . Tight." He covered me with his gun from the other side of the compartment "Tighter. Now toss me the wrench." He stuck the wrench in his belt. "Now your coat, shoes and socks." I took them off and tossed them at his feet. He picked them up and went out and the lock snapped to.

The temperature was maybe a little above freezing. I settled down on a crate of asparagus, then remembered I better keep moving. After a couple of hours of trying to preserve a balance between fatigue and freezing by alternate short rests and pacing around, I was sure that one dirty son named Bastetti was going to have his fat face sticking through the back of his head—if he didn't kill me first. The last louse who tried to discipline me is missing about ten front teeth, and I wouldn't start making exceptions for Bastetti or his gun.

By eleven o'clock, when O'Brien opened the door and let me out, I was just able to stand, but I had an idea. The big ape had his hand in his pocket, of course, as if he took people out of cold storage every day. Barefooted, I followed him up the ladders and through the passageways. He stepped aside at the door of Bastetti's room and stood aside while I went in. Bastetti looked up at me. "Learn anything?"

"Yeah." I sat down on the settee against the bulkhead.

"On your feet. At attention." I stood up. "And say, 'sir'."

"Yes, sir," I said, with a mental picture of him picking his teeth up off the deck, one at a time.

"Perhaps you've learned to keep your nose out of things that don't concern you at all."

"Yes, sir."

He leaned back in his chair. "Maybe if you're tired fighting us, sometime, you might like to join us. Be a lot easier for you."

He let me go then.

I WENT to the pantry and got something to eat, then went up and relieved Rifkin. It was the toughest watch I've ever stood. Starbuck, drunk but on his feet, wandered in and out, muttering things I was too tired to hear. A thoroughly gassed Olson relieved me at four o'clock, and I went below.

I slept without dreaming for seven hours until the ordinary seaman called me at eleven-thirty. I fell asleep again and he had to call me a second time. I was five or ten minutes late relieving Rifkin. I walked into the dark wheelhouse, blind from the bright light below, and collided with Rifkin as he waited, fuming, for me to relieve him.

"What's the matter, jerk, can't you relieve on time?" he demanded.

"Sorry," I said.

"You be a lot sorrier in a little while. Soon as you can see. I'm gonna cave your face in. I'll give you ten minutes." His

voice was soft, like a muted violin playing behind a velvet curtain.

"Thanks," I said. I waited until I could see. "Come on."

He moved toward me from the other side of the wheelhouse and as he came close he started to raise his hands. I put out a left and it connected solid to the middle of his face and I followed it with a short inside that hit so hard it hurt *me*. It didn't stop him. He just came moving in on me.

I kept moving back and hitting him with everything I had, which is considerable. I might as well have been pounding on the side of the ship. We'd circled twice around the binnacle, the quartermaster taking it as nothing much, and he was still crowding me.

"You'll have to do better than that, Mr. Second Mate. I can take more than you can give."

He was right. He'd taken just about all I had. I decided to make a stand and get it over with one way or another. I slowed down the back pedaling only a little bit when he got me with a left that knocked me the full width of the wheelhouse. I got up and went back to the old tactics, but I wasn't moving fast enough now. He tagged me three or four times with those sledgehammers, and I knew it couldn't be long.

The desk was slippery with blood, mostly Rifkin's, but mine too. I dodged sideways and hooked his ankle with my toe, lifted up and grabbed his heel in the palm of my hand and heaved. It wasn't Queensbury, but it worked. I was on him like a mink before he could get up. I grapevined his leg and half-nelsoned him and twisted one against the other. Something had to give. It did. I was digging my elbow into his jugular, cutting off the flow of blood to the brain, and he went out like a light and I kept him out for maybe five minutes.

You can literally tear a man in half with that hold, and it was strictly from chicken that I only blacked him out with the elbow in the jugular.

He was good and sick when he started coming out of it. He didn't even look at me. I dragged him into a corner and left him there. I went out on the wing and tried to stand my watch, but I got sick, heaved over the side, and finally began to hurt like hell all over and I couldn't stay on my feet.

I went in the wheelhouse. "Keep a good lookout," I said to the quartermaster. "If you see anything go around it. Red light on the starboard bow, go hard right until he's on the port bow." Then I laid down beside Rifkin and passed out.

I came to before daylight with the cat sniffing in my ear. Rifkin was gone.

NEITHER one of us stood watch the next day, but I was okay after that. A couple of days later, after Olson had relieved me at four o'clock in the morning, I went to the chartroom to write up my log and put a DR on the chart.

Bastetti had relieved O'Brien and was drinking coffee as a sailor would, half asleep and absorbed in tasting and smelling as he came slow awake. Starbuck was bent over the chart with dividers in his fingers, unsteadily stepping off a distance along the course line. I leaned over beside him at the high desk and picked up a pencil and opened the logbook. "Captain," I whispered.

His drunken old eyes slid around to me. "Huh?"

He tried to focus. "Damnit," I said, "leave that bottle alone! You've got to. This stinking tub is full of jet engines! If we work it right, we can louse Bastetti up good. You and Olson have more brains and experience between you than the rest of us put together. Always comes a time when you've maybe got a chance to hit one. This is it!"

I heard Bastetti put his coffee cup down on the shelf in the wheelhouse, and I got busy with the pencil. Starbuck went on fumbling with the dividers as if I'd never been near him. It was too late, I guessed,

to get anything out of this old soldier of misfortune. I'd probably wind up that way myself, if I was lucky, but not before I'd had a try at this. Hell with the consequences. None of us had anything to lose.

Bastetti put his head in the chartroom, looked us over, then went back to the wheelhouse. I went to my bunk, but I couldn't sleep. I lay there for an hour, hearing only the sounds of the ship and the sea. Then there was one soft footfall in the passageway and a figure stepped into the room. "Iarsen?"

"Yes," I whispered. It was Starbuck. He sounded sober.

"You're on, boy."

I breathed deep and there was a swelling in my throat. "Careful," I said. "Lay off the sauce, but don't let 'em know it."

"Okay."

"How about Rifkin?" I whispered.

"Don't know."

"Neither do I. Hope he's all right, but we better not count on him." The cat started to jump off the bunk and I grabbed it. "Take it easy," I said. "Better go now. We gotta do something quick. Not much time."

"All right." He went out the door. I heard one soft step; then he was gone.

We were still in the area of miserable North Pacific weather, but as the great circle began to curve back to the South, there were short periods when the sky was blue, and you could look into the wind occasionally without it blowing your eyes right out of your head. The day was less foggy, and that night the watch seemed shorter as the cold stars looked down. They seemed to be saying, *Well, little man, let's see what you can do.* I told them to go to hell and laughed, but only for a second. Starbuck was shuffling drunkenly around, and at four o'clock that morning he gave me a deadpan stare that was more eloquent than a leering wink.

One of the overseers, Murphy, was out on the wing of the bridge when Olson

relieved me. Starbuck grabbed the mate by the shoulder and turned him around, looking close into his face. "Where the hell did you get that bottle? I thought I put it all over the side."

Olson tried to pull away from him and Starbuck kicked him hard on the shin. Murphy started into the wheelhouse and I coughed. Starbuck let go, and the mate leaned down to rub his shin. The captain shot a glance at me in the dark, then turned to Olson just as Murphy came in.

Starbuck belched. "Ole, stars are good this morning. Get your sextant and maybe we can find out where the hell we are."

Olson glared at him, then turned and headed for the chart room as Murphy stood watching. I went below then. It had probably been so long since Olson had used a chart—much less worked a sight—that he'd play hell getting a fix, and then it wouldn't be worth a damn, anyhow.

Next day I relieved Rifkin at noon, as usual. The soft white baby-skin of his face was still puffed like an ulcerated balloon, purple and blue and yellow and green. He moved slow and he hurt.

He turned his head toward me as I came up, slow like he favored it, but he didn't wince. He tried to grin, but the eyes weren't part of it. He couldn't get the cold hardness out of them, and I realized that he was tough like the rest of us; defensively wary, always expecting the attack and determined not to be hit first. Learning to hit first yourself, rather than wait for the attack.

I know the feeling—I knew it better then—it's not a result of anything you can work out in your mind and then follow. It's more like a deep-rooted fear, an anxiety, that won't let you be anything but tough. It's something that makes you feel you have to make all your mistakes good at any cost, that won't let you admit error or accept criticism, much less actual offense or injury. You never forget them. Rifkin had it bad, worse than I did. As a brute he was entirely too effective.

"Okay, boy," he said, "you got 'er." He gave me the course then turned away to go below. The movement hurt him and he grunted. "Son of a gun," he muttered, limping into the wheelhouse and back to the chartroom to write up his log. Yet there was sore stiffness all through me as bad as Rifkin's, and my face was marked up as bad as his.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost Ship

MURPHY was in the wheelhouse, and O'Brien, one of the others—the one who looked and acted like a trained ape—was out on the port wing on the other side from me. For maybe five minutes I looked absently around the horizon before I heard steps in the wheelhouse. Bastetti came out onto the wing, and behind him was O'Brien with a Tommy gun.

"Murphy," Bastetti said, "get the third mate up here."

"Stand there with Larsen," Bastetti told Rifkin when he came up. Rifkin gave him a surly glance and moved toward me. Starbuck and Olson came out and were told to stand with Rifkin and me.

"Now, I seem to sense a little plot here." Bastetti glanced from one to another of us, his eye finally settling on me. "I think you're the instigator, Larsen. In case there is a doubt in anyone's mind, we have the means—" he nodded toward O'Brien—"of liquidating any fumbling attempts. . . ." He looked at O'Brien with the gun, then turned suddenly on Rifkin. "And where do you stand, my friend?"

We all looked, first at Rifkin, then at Bastetti, and then at O'Brien and the tommygun.

Rifkin grunted. "Go to hell, you lousy flunky."

O'Brien centered the Tommy gun on him. Rifkin looked straight at the muzzle of it. There was no sound for maybe ten sec-

onds. When Rifkin spoke again, his voice was softer than ever.

"Even money you haven't the guts to use the damn thing on me, you cheap phony." He began to move toward O'Brien.

Bastetti was silent, watching. Rifkin was two yards from O'Brien and moving closer, his strange voice like the sound of a wind from another world. "Back under your stone, you white slug."

There was a look of panic on O'Brien's face. Bastetti's voice cracked like a whip. "O'Brien!"

The big man with the Tommy gun stiffened and the gun jumped and there was the close splattering thunder of the short burst and the front of Rifkin's parka fluttered like a wind had touched it. His head jerked back, came down, and I saw the spreading red stain. Rifkin was dead on his feet.

His head was down like a bull's, his shoulders were bowed and his arms hung loose at his sides, and he kept moving toward O'Brien. The man with the gun stood there looking at the blood and at Rifkin, who was still coming toward him and raising his hands and getting him by the throat and bending his head back. There was a cracking sound, and O'Brien's head was bent back double.

The Tommy gun fell on the deck, and O'Brien crumpled on top of it. Rifkin was still on his feet. He turned and walked back toward me. I won't forget, ever, him coming toward me. His eyes were wide open, but with the dead glaze filming them over, and his mouth was open a little and the whole broad front of him red and shining. His knees began to buckle as he reached me. He fell against me and I caught him in my arms and let him down easy onto the deck.

Bastetti stooped to pick up the Tommy gun and I was on him. I got the muzzle in my left hand, trying to keep it away from me and get a clear shot at his teeth at the same time. Then I got the chance I'd

wanted since that night in the ice-box. I felt the teeth go and it was good.

I had the gun, so Murphy and Flynn let go a couple of wild shots as they ducked back into the wheelhouse and ran below. I squirted a short burst in after them, more as a reminder than anything else.

"Get those slobs before they go below!" Starbuck yelled. He dove into the wheelhouse and I jumped over the flattened Bastetti and followed. Too late "Damn it," Starbuck said, "now we're for it." He turned briskly to Olson. "Lock all those doors!" He was the Master now.

"Yah," Olson said, and did it. I think he was sober. The sound of footsteps clattering down the ladders to the maindeck stopped abruptly with the closing of the doors. The sickle-scarred able seaman looked up at me from the binnacle with a calm questioning glance, as if he accepted the situation but would appreciate some information.

I looked back to where I'd left Bastetti flat on the deck. He was gone, and I wished I'd hit him once or twice more so he wouldn't have moved so fast. Rifkin and O'Brien lay where they'd fallen. Starbuck secured the doors leading out to the wings. "Hell," he said, "this can't go on for long. Them in possession of the whole ship, and us in the wheelhouse. . . ."

Olson grunted, squinting as he tried to think "Yah. We need food and water, if we stay here long." He walked over to the chart desk and, pulling out one of the drawers, looked inside and closed it.

Starbuck almost laughed. "You won't find any there. But that's still pretty good, Ole. First time this trip you've had an idea that made any sense at all." He looked out of the port. "But those life-boats aren't so far away, and they've got food and water in them—and it'll be dark in four hours."

I MOVED across the wheelhouse and stood beside him, watching the boat deck. A head appeared above the fishplate from

below. It was the bosun. He ducked back down, but came running up the ladder in a few seconds, with the rest of the crew crushed at his heels.

Starbuck muttered something as they went for the boats and ripped the covers off, unshipped the gripes, and swung the boats out. I threw the safety catch of the gun and started for the door. Starbuck touched my arm. "No," he said, "let them go—like rats—and there'll be only us and those phony sons below . . . left to decide who's got the most of what it takes."

"Okay with me," I said. I put the safety back on. The click seemed to agitate Olson.

"You're nuts!" he said. He was quiet for a moment, making an effort to calm himself, as he looked at Starbuck. "The gang takes off, we can't handle the ship, and with no boats we're stuck aboard! God, man, we can drift right up to the Bering sea and freeze to death like herrings in a refrigerator. You float around in that ice long enough, and your hair falls out, and then you die, slow and wet."

"What the hell do you care?" Starbuck demanded. "Important thing" is to louse those guys up good."

"Oughta be a better way to do it than that," Olson said, stubborn like a mule.

"Wanna go with 'em?" Starbuck said.

The blocks chattered as the falls rove through and the boats dropped down the side.

"Go to hell," said Olson, sullen, but calm and easy. He'd had his say and he felt better. "Been a gashound all your life and now you're gonna be a hero."

"Yeah," Starbuck said. "And you will be too, if I have to kill you first." He glowered threateningly from under his long brows and moved toward Olson.

"All right, all right!" Olson told him hastily. "If ya wanna be a damn gizoonty, I suppose I gotta go along and be one too. But don't say I didn't tell you."

The chief mate began walking back and forth as the boats pulled away from the

ship. They stepped their masts and set the mildewed sails. For a couple of hours after, they were still visible as the light breeze pushed them slowly away to the west.

Starbuck sat on the pilot stool with his back against the chart desk and beckoned me with a movement of his head. "I don't think those punks will try to rush us as long as they know we have *that* thing—" he jerked his thumb at the Tommy gun. "How many you got in it?"

"Just what's in the magazine. Forty, maybe."

"That should hold 'em for a while, I guess. You any good with that thing?"

"Never used one before. I'm fair with a pistol; better'n fair with a rifle. This thing doesn't shoot good, though. Maybe fifty yards I could hit a man seven out of ten, but beyond that—I don't know. Barrel is too short, and it jumps like a wild donkey when you let go a burst. I'll keep it on single-fire unless they gang-rush us."

"Gotta do better'n that," Starbuck told me. "Be dark in three, four hours. . . ." He chewed reflectively on his lower lip. "They'll be below in the midship house somewhere, and comes dark they'll be crawling out like rats for a try at the cheese. Only chance for us is to meet 'em better'n half way. Out on the decks somewhere . . . in the dark."

He glanced out again. "Looks like it'll be a cloudy night—I hope. Be bad if there's a moon. But they're probably thinking the same thing. Feel like crawling around on your belly in the dark?"

"Not too much. But I'd like to get my hands on that Prussian boy scout again, so I guess I won't mind it more'n I can stand."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Okay."

I rested the Tommy gun on top of the chart desk while he talked to Ole. It was simple; just out-strong-arm them, the four of us against the three of them. As Starbuck talked on, I felt the beat of the engine die away, and the ship began to lose her way.

"Fire's out in the boilers," Starbuck said. "Nobody firing." He laughed softly. "So that makes it easier. Won't have to worry about keeping her on her course."

He turned to the quartermaster. "That's all at the wheel. Say, what's your name?"

"Socrates." The accent was thick.

"Socrates what?"

"Venizelos."

"All right, Socrates, take care of yourself. That's all you have to do."

"I take care of myself. Maybe dirty Bastetti, too, I take care of." He leered and the scar curved up like a rising crescent moon.

THREE hours later, it was black dark with no moon and not a cold star to look down and ask me who the hell I thought I was. The portholes there were dark circles, only slightly blacker than the inside of the wheelhouse. In the murk, you couldn't make out the sea or find the horizon.

"Now," Starbuck said.

The Greek was on my heels as I stepped through. He moved soundlessly down the ladder to the boat deck, and I heard a little click from the other side as the door closed behind Starbuck, leaving a nervous Ole alone in the wheelhouse. In the dark, Socrates snaked outboard to the boat cradles and dropped to his belly, crawling aft to the ladder leading down to the main deck.

I followed after a minute. I wanted to be close to whatever happened. I knew that Starbuck would be made reckless by the thought of maybe hitting one this time, and Socrates would be like a headhunter in the dark. He came to the break of the boat deck and lay belly down behind the cradle, raising his head and peering over the fishplate like a cat in the grass.

Softly, I went down the ladder, hugging the bulkhead as I moved aft. Socrates heard me and looked around. His arm came up with the broad-bladed clasp knife, then pulled back into the shadow of his flank. I

went down on the deck and crawled over to him.

"Nothing," he whispered.

Across the deck, Starbuck lay behind the shelter of the other boat-cradle, bracing himself against the sluggish rolling of the stopped ship wallowing in the trough of the sea.

I crawled across to him.

"Only place they can see both ends of the ship from is the main deck, fore and aft," he whispered. There was a noise behind us and Ole came scuttling on his belly.

"One of 'em just went forward. Behind hatch coaming Number One." His teeth chattered, and the piece of pipe in his hand vibrated.

"Which one?" Starbuck asked.

"Murphy or Flynn. Couldn't tell. Wasn't Bastetti, though."

"Okay. Go back and keep an eye on him."

Ole started to say something. "Go on," Starbuck prodded. Ole groaned softly, turned, and crawled forward.

"One," Starbuck said. "Bet the other two go aft, if they haven't already. They'll split up and watch both ends. Smart, in a way. But not so smart in another. They'll probably leave one man amidships, and send the third aft. Six to one says it's Bastetti who stays."

"Keep it. I wouldn't take twenty to one on that."

There was a sound like a door slamming. I jumped. "Hell!" Starbuck groaned, "they got Ole!"

He started for the bridge and I grabbed him. "If they did, you can't do anything for him now."

Across the deck, the Greek had already started forward, moving like a quick shadow. He disappeared past the house. I crawled over and took a look around the corner. He'd just reached the bottom of the ladder leading up to the wing of the bridge when there was movement at the top of the ladder and Socrates faded back

under the overhand of the bridge deck.

The figure came down the ladder soundlessly. There was a merging of shapes in the dark, and then Socrates moved toward me, dragging the other by the neck.

He flung it at my feet; a Murphy almost decapitated by a slash of the blade which Socrates now wiped on his victim's shirt.

"One," he beamed, then sobered. "Dirty rat kill mate."

"Better stay together now," I said. "Go back with the captain. No more leaving anybody alone without a gun."

"Have other gun now." He pulled Murphy's pistol from his pocket. We crawled back to Starbuck and I told him about Ole.

"Damn it," he muttered. "That was my fault."

"Maybe, but if Ole hadn't been there, Murphy'd have had us all from the rear. We're all expendable. Cheap too, for four party punks. We're worth a hell of a lot more than that, but the market ain't so good right now."

He didn't say anything. Socrates handed him the pistol. "Knife better for me. No use gun. You take."

Starbuck held the gun in his two hands like it was a cup he would drink from. "Okay. Let's go. We've got only tonight. Comes daylight, Bastetti will have us."

He turned and led the way slowly and cautiously down the ladder to the main deck, stopping for half a minute at the foot of the ladder to look up at me. The look seemed to say, *Here we go boy. I hope it ain't gonna be too bad.*

I nodded down at him and touched his shoulder lightly—and felt Socrates' hand on my own shoulder.

AS SOON as we moved aft from the ladder, we'd become cold turkey for anyone in the midship house or on the fantail. Aft of the house was Number Three

hatch, then the mizzenmast with a tabernacle house at the bottom of it. The winches were next on the deck, then came hatch Four, then the fantail.

With Starbuck leading, we dived for the cover between Number Three and the tabernacle. I knew we would get it and we did. There was a long burst from the midship house and Socrates went sprawling on his face like a sack of loose-packed rice. I dived behind the hatch coaming and landed on top of Starbuck.

He half-rolled, turning his face up to me. "Get," he started to say, and the blood flooded into his throat and he went flat on the deck and under him it shone liquid dark.

I looked up, and Flynn was coming toward me from amidships with a Tommy gun. I made out Bastetti's head up over the other side of the hatch. I threw the safety off and held the trigger back until it stopped firing, locked open and empty. Flynn went down, wavering, like a sail fluttering down from the gaff when the halyard parts in a dead calm. He was maybe thirty feet from me.

Bastetti started down the deck to retrieve the tommygun—it must have been the only other one they had—and I thought of groping for the pistol Starbuck had had, but there wasn't time.

Bastetti, pistol in hand, was within fifteen feet of the tommy. I went for him and he fired twice and only nicked me once in the thigh. We reached the tommygun at the same time and we both had our hands on it, but he didn't have the hands of a man who works—and I had his pistol hand by the wrist.

Both the guns went over the side and Bastetti screamed. I picked him up by the front of the shirt and looked at his face. His mouth was open and there was a long gap in his uppers. I hauled off and made a long gap in his lowers, too.

He sprawled on the deck, making little convulsive movements; then his hand reached out and grabbed the Greek's broad-

bladed knife. While I stood there watching, he plunged it into his throat and fell back with the knife sticking out from under his chin.

I felt empty and I went over and sat. For maybe half an hour I just sat on the hatch. I felt the cold, and there was nothing to do now except wait. But for what?

After a while I got up and went to my room and got a bottle and had a couple of stiff ones. Then I went back out on deck and eased the eight bodies over the side into the cold, January North Pacific.

By daylight I was beginning to freeze, and there wasn't a warm place anywhere on the ship. I looked at the thermometer on the bridge and it was seventeen above. Later, I got out the log and started writing.

This day in latitude 49 degrees 22.4 minutes north, longitude 164 degrees 40 minutes East by dead reckoning, did commit to the sea with such honors as merited, the mortal remains of John Starbuck, Master; Ole Olson, Chief Mate; Abraham Rifkin, Third Mate; Socrates Venizelos, Able Seaman; one Bastetti, one Flynn, one Murphy, one O'Brien, the last four all supercargo and not on ship's articles. . . .

I put my hands in my pockets for a couple of minutes and looked at my breath condensing in front of my face, then I went on writing.

These last died by violence, at the hands of the first four and of Joseph Larsen, second mate and survivor, as follows. . . .

I wrote for two hours, and every couple of minutes I warmed my hands in my pockets.

Then I collected half a dozen blankets and piled them on my sack and crawled in. The damn cat was still there, trying to keep warm, and I let it under the blankets.

It was dark that afternoon when I came to. I tried to start a fire in the galley range, until I remembered that even the cook had complained about it. It wouldn't draw, and the kindling I got by kicking Bastetti's chair apart wouldn't catch. I found some lousy

canned meat and ate it. Even the cat wasn't hungry enough yet to have any of it.

I went back to the chartroom and wrote up the log for the day:

Second day adrift. Rough sea, vessel rolling heavily in trough. Temperature plus two dry bulb, plus one wet. Wet bulb hard-frozen and cracked.

For eighteen days I wrote the same kind of thing each day. My beard grew out and my clothes smelled, and I would sit huddled in a chair or curled in the sack not thinking of anything, just breathing. Every night the aurora flamed and shimmered and danced coldly and beautifully, like an ice ballet. I slept some, not much. I always dreamed, but I could never remember about what. Then one morning I was able to remember I'd dreamt of home and the house and the shop and Little Kennebec.

THAT night, I sat in the wheelhouse in Starbuck's pilot-chair which was built in and placed so you could see all around. The cat was curled tight in my lap, and a flare gun hung by its lanyard from the speaking tube. All night long, I kept a lookout.

The next day I slept a little. The wind had been blowing strong for days, never below force eight, and sometimes up to ten or eleven, just short of full hurricane strength. This night it died to a whisper and the thermometer stood at thirty-seven below.

I opened a window and began walking back and forth. The cat mewed from the deck at my feet, and I picked it up and put it inside my shirt. I was afraid to sit down. Falling asleep in the cold. . . .

A couple of hours later, I felt I couldn't stay on my feet any longer. I sat down for a minute just to rest. Later, I felt the cat digging its claws into my belly and I half came to. There was a sound . . . like the wind in the pines up on the mountain in back of Emerald Lake.

I wanted to go back to sleep, but the cat

kept digging and scratching and the sound kept getting louder. Then the sound was the unmuffled blast of plane engines. I reared up out of the chair like a half dead old boar hawg on the prod and fell against the bulkhead. I slid to the deck and felt the flare gun against me.

I put it out the window and pointed it up and fired. I loaded it and fired again, and after a minute the sound of the engines came back louder than before. I fired another flare. A searchlight fingered down through the cold murk and touched the forcecastle head with a print of light. It moved the length of the ship like a blind man fingering a strange object, and circled. And circled.

Then the plane went off in a straight line to the northeast. It was noon the next day when the destroyer hove up over the horizon to the north and headed up into the wind in the lee of the *Perseus'* drifting hulk. I watched her through the glasses and I could see men on her bridge watching me. She was American, all right.

I waved, then remembered to run up the International Code distress signal. The flags were stiff with ice as I bent them on the halyard from the flying bridge and the skin and flesh began to slough off my fingers.

The destroyer came close alongside and the loudspeaker on her deck crackled and blared. "Stand by for a boat!"

The boat had heavy going, and it took them an hour to come alongside. I stuck the log inside my shirt with the cat and went down the ladder to the pitching, rising, falling boat and down into it like a bag of stones. I sat there in the bottom of it with the crews legs and feet all around me and almost lost my slack grip on reality. Everything that had happened since I'd left Little Kennebec seemed more unreal than the wierdest dream.

The officer in the boat had all he could do, and nobody said a word to me. On the deck of the destroyer I handed the log to a three-striper and went out like a candle.

Later—next day, I guess—they asked me some questions. The intelligence officer wanted to know if there was anything I wanted to add to the logbook account. I couldn't think of anything.

"Well," he said, "we're bound for Adak. Intelligence there will want to talk with you. Meantime, we've sent for a tug to come out and tow the *Perseus* in. I imagine you'll have to be—er—available for a few days. Civil authorities, you know."

I knew. It would take more explaining than I felt capable of to put this story across.

We were in Adak three days later. Intelligence was all right, but the civil authorities gave me a bad time. I told them I wanted to be paid for my time on the *Perseus* before I answered any questions, so they got the Shipping Commissioner. He paid me the two hundred due me; enough for a phone call home and passage out if they let me go.

Ma answered the phone. "Where *are* you!"

I told her.

"Where's that? Never heard of it."

"Never mind," I said, "what about the other thing?"

"What thing?"

"You know. That guy . . . Bess . . . why the hell do you think I took off?"

"I wouldn't know, Joe. You always were kind of crazy. When you disappeared I didn't think very much about it, except that you might have been upset about losing Bess in that automobile accident."

"Look, there was a guy, a used-car dealer, who got killed just before I left—the guy who used to follow Bess around."

"Oh," she said uncertainly, "yes, I think I do remember . . . the coroner's jury said he was drunk and fell off the cliff. Anyhow, the kids are fine; all in school now. You better get home and start taking care of the shop . . ."

She went on and on, but the only thing I heard was that one line ringing in my ears: "*Drunk and fell off the cliff.*" ♦ ♦ ♦

By CHARLES BECKMAN, Jr.



She struggled wildly, kicking, and beating at them with her purse. . . .

DOLL, DROP DEAD!

For years, Claude had dreamed of meeting a beautiful girl who was as tall as he was, and who could learn to love him. But even in his wildest nightmares, he never imagined the kind of friends she might have!

THIS was a new experience for Claude Dreeber, being knocked unconscious. Once, last winter, he had slipped on the ice and struck the back of his head on a curb, stunning himself. But this time he had been completely unconscious for a long time, hours maybe.

Of course, he wasn't immediately aware of what had happened to him. He regained consciousness in a slow, painful manner, unable at first to gather the scattered threads of his reason. He thought it was

morning and he'd overslept and would be late getting to the bank. When that thought jerked him to a sitting position, a wave of nausea swept over him, and a riveting machine went to work on the back of his head. He sank back with a groan, staring wide-eyed at the darkness above him. Burglars! They'd broken into his room and robbed him!

He started up again, disregarding the pain. But then he heard a woman's sobs. That held him for a moment. It began to dawn on him that this room was strange. Some light edged in through the tilted slats of venetian blinds. His room had old-fashioned pull shades that he had bought for a quarter.

He groped around on the table for his glasses without finding them. Fumbling in the dark, he got his feet firmly planted on the carpet. Well, it certainly wasn't his floor, which he had covered with flowered linoleum he'd found in a second-hand shop. He arose shakily, holding on to the bed post. The darkness spun around him. Touching the spot on the back of his head where all the hammering was going on, he got his fingers sticky.

Blood!

He shivered, glad of the darkness so he couldn't see what was on his hand.

He began feeling along the wall for a light switch. Then he spied a crack of light under a door and edged in that direction. The woman's sobbing grew louder. Why, it sounded like Miss Hurley's voice. But what would she be doing, crying at her own party?

Yes, now he remembered. They had been having a party, Miss Hurley, and her younger sister, Dorothy, who had gotten very drunk and loud, and Mr. Noakes, the man with the toupee, and himself, Claude Drecher.

It had seemed like such a nice party. What in the world had happened, him getting knocked out this way and Miss Hurley crying like that in the other room? Maybe

they'd carried him in here and Patsy—Miss Hurley—was crying because he'd hurt himself. That thought made his heart gallop. He opened the door quickly to reassure her that he was all right.

He got the door open and was half way across the threshold before he stopped, because he saw a tall, spider-thin man with squinting, myopic eyes, and sparse brown hair, balding on top. Claude stood there in a very foolish position, hanging onto the doorknob as if he were afraid it would run away. His eyes squinted in horrified fascination at the body of Dorothy Hurley crumpled in a pitiful heap on the floor and Patsy Hurley kneeling beside her, sobbing. Across the room sat the round-faced man, Hubert Noakes, with the hand-painted purple necktie and the toupee, holding an automatic loosely on his knee.

It was like walking onto a stage in the big scene of a melodrama. Claude Drecher tried to hang onto his spinning mind and make some sense out of this weird nightmare.

HE THOUGHT back to a few nights ago when he met Patsy Hurley. Everything was sane and ordinary then. That afternoon at the bank was like any other he'd spent there for the past fifteen years. Except that today he was excited in a very special way. At closing time, he arranged some odd papers in his cashier's cage. He spied a bent paper clip on the floor, picked it up, carefully straightened it and dropped it in a box, then left for the day.

At the door, Bob Patteny, the smart alec teller in the "W" section, clapped him on the back and exclaimed, "Claude, how about setting the boys up to a beer?" and winked broadly at the other fellows.

Patteny knew full well that he didn't squander his money on useless trivialities like afternoon beers. A glass of milk and a graham cracker had just as much nourishment.

But he was feeling too good to let a little

run-in with Bob Pattey upset him. He walked down the street, humming a tune. At the corner of Maple street, he paused before the Royal Theater.

A musical review was currently running. There were pictures of the cast on the walls of the outer lobby. Claude picked out Patsy Hurley from a line of dazzling beauties. A magnificent woman, with a body like Venns, long hair cascading down her back in a golden stream, sculptured arms uplifted. She was so beautiful and there was so much of her—six glamorous feet!

Claude continued down the street, whistling. He stopped at the florist and purchased a dozen red roses. He felt not a twinge as he took out his coin purse, un-snapped it, and counted out ten one-dollar bills.

To be perfectly frank, Claude Dreeber was in love. For the first time in his life. Head over heels, glassy-eyed in love. Like an adolescent school boy. He was in love with a six-foot-tall blonde chorus girl.

He walked home with happy little bouncin' steps.

His landlady, Mrs. Sabalata, met him on the stairs. Her eyes widened. "For goodness sake, Mr. Dreeber, who gave you the flowers? You're not sick, are you?"

"I just bought them," he explained.

"*B-bought* them?" Her mouth sagged and she dropped her broom.

On the third floor of the cheap rooming house, he unlocked his door. Lucifer, his black cat, hopped off a chair and greeted him with a rub. He bent to scratch the cat's ear. "And how's the mouse business been today, old fellow?"

Lucifer answered with a contented purr, indicating considerable success along those lines.

Dreeber liked cats. For one thing, they were inexpensive pets to feed. Lucifer went out the fire escape every morning and caught mice or foraged in garbage cans for his subsistence.

Claude laid the roses on a table, took off

his shabby gray coat and hung it on a nail beside his only other suit, a shiny blue serge. He had purchased them at a bargain in a second-hand store three years ago.

The next thing he did was to take down a set of well-thumbed ledger books and make some entries in his neat, precise handwriting. This book contained a record of every cent he had spent in the past fifteen years.

Another book held the amount of his income. He took it down and checked his balance again for reassurance. There it was, \$20,987.33—not a small sum for a poor boy out of the slums to have saved in just fifteen years at a bank employee's small salary. He felt a warm, safe glow, seeing those figures.

He got up, whistling and went about the business of preparing supper on his hot plate. Some people at the bank called him a miser, fellows like Pattey who were always in hock with the finance company. What they wouldn't give to have a sum like that tucked away in good, hard cash!

After supper he bathed and shaved. He thought he'd wear the blue suit; it was dressier and didn't shine so badly at night. He had a clean white shirt. The cuffs were a bit ragged, but he could turn them back so they wouldn't show.

Promptly at seven, he tucked the roses under his arm and departed for the theater. His heart raced and his palms grew damp. He'd never in his life even asked a girl for a date. Now he was about to saunter backstage and meet a glamorous actress face to face. What would he say to her?

He'd been in love with Patsy Hurley for exactly seven days. A week ago, tonight, he had come to this theater. Mr. Harrison, the bank president, had some extra tickets and had given one to Claude. It was the first musical review he had ever attended. He'd been entranced. All those beautiful young ladies! And then the row of tall girls, every one six feet tall—and in the center, his Patsy.

Claude had always liked tall women, perhaps because he was over six feet tall, himself, and these girls were as beautiful and perfectly formed as they were tall. The one in the middle—his program told him she was Miss Patsy Hurley—was his favorite. Maybe because he was quite certain she had winked directly at him once during her dance. He'd promptly fallen in love with her there and then.

He'd been back to the theater every night this week.

NOW he walked around to the alley back of the theater where the show people entered. He paused for a final check in a penny scale mirror. Looking back at him out of the mirror was a tall, thin man with gangling arms and legs, and large knobby hands. He was just thirty-five, but the bald spot on top of his head and the horn-rimmed glasses made him appear older. He thought, with sudden anxiety, suppose she didn't like him? She must have dozens of admirers.

He went around and stood beside the stage door entrance. It started drizzling. He drew back, pushing himself against the wall.

The actors and dancers were arriving. They came in little knots, talking and laughing.

Then he saw her.

Head and shoulders above the other girls in her group, she stood out in any crowd. She was dressed in a red wool suit that hugged the lovely contours of her body, and her long hair was wound up in a golden bun on the back of her neck.

She was passing right by him! Near enough for him to touch!

"Uh . . . Miss . . . I beg your pardon, I—"

She brushed by him with the others. She hadn't even noticed him. Claude's heart jumped against his skinny rib cage. His knees like water, he started after her, frantically trying to catch her attention.

A messenger boy came racing out of the door. He bumped into Claude, upsetting his balance. Claude's arms flailed out. The roses flew out of his hand and he sprawled into a puddle of water. A taxi pulled up beside the curb.

Claude saw his beautiful roses disappear under its wheels.

He pulled himself, dripping, out of the puddle. He sloshed out of the alley like a bedraggled spider. For a long time, he walked blindly through the rain, hands in his pockets, head bowed.

"She didn't even notice me," he mumbled.

But seeing her so close made him love her even more. Desire for her burned in him like a great hunger. He *had* to meet her, somehow.

He went home, changed into his other suit, returned to the theater in time for the second act. After the show, he went around to the alley and took up his station against the wall.

The cast poured out. He waited patiently in the drizzle. She was one of the last to leave. The theater was dark when she came out, dressed again in the red suit. There were no more taxis in the alley. She stood in the exit door for a moment, hesitantly. Then she held her purse over her head and started down the sidewalk, her beautiful legs taking long, running strides, her high heels tapping.

Claude started after her. His mouth was dry. What should he say? He had no flowers to present. . . .

She was almost down to the mouth of the alley. Claude hurried to catch her. Then his feet froze to the sidewalk.

Two men came out of the shadows under a fire escape. One of them grabbed the big blonde from behind, clapping his hand over her mouth. She struggled wildly, kicking and beating at them with her purse. She was quite a handful, even for two men. One of her attackers grunted a muffled curse as her toe caught his knees cap. He

raised his hand. In it was a blackjack, poised over her lovely blonde head.

The only sound was the shuffle of their feet on the wet concrete and an occasional stifled grunt. Claude forced himself to move. Frantically, his eyes searched for a weapon. He spied a garbage can spilling over with papers and trash. A long box protruded from the junk. He snatched that out. It was light in his hands—just a long, narrow cardboard box. But he didn't consider the effectiveness of it. He waded into the men, his arm swinging the box like a windmill. He yelled and pounded at their heads and kicked.

The sudden fury of his attack scattered the two thugs. Frightened, they released the girl, turned and ran out the mouth of the alley without looking back.

Patsy Hurley stumbled against the brick wall. She dropped her purse and covered her face with her hands, sobbing hysterically. Claude picked up her purse and tried to comfort her. "It's all right, Miss Hurley," he soothed. "They're gone. I won't let them hurt you again."

He stood on one foot, then the other, and patted her shoulder awkwardly.

Her sobs subsided a bit. "I w-want to go home," she sniffed.

"Of course. I'll get you a cab."

He went to the mouth of the alley, whistled down a passing taxi. Then he took her arm, led her out to it gently. "If you'll permit me," he said, "I'll escort you home to see that you don't experience any more unpleasantness." He got in beside her, closed the door.

She gave the driver her address, then huddled on her side of the seat, a big frightened girl. She took a handkerchief out of her purse, dabbed at her nose. Then she looked at him. "Who are you?"

"Permit me to introduce myself, Miss Hurley. My name is Claude Dreeber. I have enjoyed your performances every night this week. I was waiting in the alley to compliment you."

She blinked her wet lashes. Then she managed a little shaky smile. "Yeah? You mean you really came every night just on account of me?"

"I certainly did." He blushed. "I had brought some flowers to give to you, but they were knocked out of my hand and a cab ran over them."

"No kidding?" She blinked again, her eyes widening. "You really brought me some flowers? What kind were they?"

"Roses," he said. "Red ones. American Beauties."

"No kidding?" she asked again. This information seemed to be of such interest to her that she momentarily forgot her recent unnerving experience. "American Beauties, huh? Gee." She peered at him out of her dark corner. "You seem to be a pretty nice sorta guy, Mr. Dreeber. What do you do?"

"I'm, uh, in the banking business."

"Really? A banker, huh?" Her eyes were large and respectful. "I didn't think you were just some ordinary stage door johnny."

THEY pulled up before a brownstone apartment building. "This is where I live, Mr. Dreeber. Won't you come up for a cup of coffee?"

Dreeber's pulse rushed through his ears like an express train. It was a dream: This couldn't be happening to him. He'd met Patsy Hurley, and she'd invited him up to her apartment all in one night!

Her apartment was small, but neat. It showed a woman's touch in the curtains, pictures on the wall, ivy growing in a planter's lamp, housekeeping magazines on a coffee table, nick-nacks and bric-a-brac on a bookcase.

She snapped on a lamp that spilled soft light over the couch. "You make yourself comfortable here," she smiled at him, "while I get outta these wet things."

He thumbed through a magazine, but he couldn't concentrate on it. He heard the

intimate sounds of her shoes hitting the floor in the next room, then the shuffle of bedroom slippers and the rustle of garments. It brought a warm flush to his cheeks. It would be wonderful, he thought, to come home to a place like this in the evening after work and have a wife like Patsy dressing in the next room.

In a moment, she emerged from the bedroom, tying the cord of her flowered housecoat. Her face looked smooth and fresh with softer makeup. She was wearing mules. The delicate fragrance of perfume followed her into the room.

She brewed two cups of delicious coffee, and they sat on the couch together, sipping it. "Tell me about your work, Mr. Dreeber. I think it would be wonderful to have a responsible, steady position like yours."

"Oh, but your life is so much more interesting," he protested. "The excitement of the stage and all. . . ."

She smiled wistfully. "It don't take much talent to dance in a line." She looked down at her enameled nails. "I just sorta drifted into it. It isn't easy for a big girl to get a regular job. People are always making fun of you. You're a kind of a freak. Even on the stage, they like to look at you, but that's all. The nice guys won't give you a tumble."

Dreeber was astonished at the note of wistful loneliness in her voice. He'd never dreamed that this gorgeous woman might be lonely, the way he was. But, he supposed, most men wouldn't want to take out a girl a head taller than themselves.

He started to say something, but there was a disturbance at the door. He heard a giggle and the fumbling of a key.

Patsy's face paled. "That's my kid sister, Dorothy." She touched his arm. "She's a good girl, Mr. Dreeber, but sometimes when she goes to a party. . . ."

The door came open, spilling a disheveled blonde into the room. She was pretty, like Patsy, but of normal size and about nineteen years old. She was also very drunk.

She waved at them, then planted a kiss on the mouth of the man who had brought her home. "G'night, Hubert. Sis's here. See you 'round."

He was a short, dumpy man, about forty. He was wearing an off-color necktie. Apparently, he used a toupee, because it was slightly askew. He flopped a hand at them, grinned wetly, and trundled off down the stairs.

"Dorothy," Patsy told her younger sister, through stiff lips, "you'd better go on to bed."

"Aren't you going to introduce me to th' company?" the younger girl pouted.

"This is Mr. Dreeber, Dorothy."

"Hi-ya," the girl grinned. She weaved over to the couch, mussed Claude's hair. "You're cute. I think I'll call you Charlie. You look like you oughta be called Charlie."

"Go to bed, Dorothy!" Patsy begged, on the verge of tears.

The smaller girl made a face and stuck out her tongue. She grinned at Dreeber. "O! kill-joy . . . always sendin' people off to bed, Charlie." She wobbled into the bedroom, slammed the door.

"I . . . I guess you better go, Mr. Dreeber," Patsy said, her lip trembling.

"Of course." At the door, Dreeber paused. "Miss Hurley, the attack of those thugs should be reported to the police. I could make the report for you."

Deep fear widened her violet eyes. "No! I . . . I mean, it wasn't anything important. Let's forget it."

"Well. . . ." He took a bank card out of his pocket. "This is where I am employed, Miss Hurley. If you ever need me, don't hesitate to telephone." He was suddenly conscious of the shabby appearance of his gray suit. He didn't want her to think he was a ne'r-do-well like that Bob Pattey. "I have saved the amount of twenty thousand dollars," he told her proudly, "during the fifteen years I have been in the employ of this bank, and I shall very likely some

day be a vice-president." He tipped his hat. "Good night, Miss Hurley."

THAT had been a couple of nights ago. Late this afternoon, Patsy Hurley had phoned him at the bank, asked him to come to the party she was having at her apartment tonight. She and her sister and the little fat Hubert Noakes had picked him up at his rooming house in Noakes' shiny convertible car.

It had been a very nice party, except that Patsy—Miss Hurley—had seemed preoccupied and nervous. Dorothy had gotten drunk and maudlin. Hubert Noakes kept forcing drinks on Claude and asking all sorts of questions about his position in the bank. Claude tried to be polite, but he wasn't used to all those strong highballs. They went to his head, and he got tipsy and giggly. Then he had gotten unsteadily to his feet and started to the bathroom. He remembered now, that Patsy had cried out behind him. And that was all—until he awoke in the bedroom a few minutes ago.

Now he was back in the living room, looking down at the body of Dorothy Hurley, still not able to believe his eyes. Patsy got to her feet. Her eyes were red and swollen. "I'm s-sorry, Mr. Dreeber," she choked. "I'm sorry for this trouble I brought you. I didn't mean it to be this way, honest. Just a loan. I just wanted to borrow a little money to get Dorothy out of town. I didn't have a cent of my own left. I was frantic, and you were the only person I could think of that might help. You were so nice the other night."

Claude shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't understand." He looked at Hubert Noakes. The little round-faced man giggled. His eyes were white-rimmed, staring. The dry hair of his toupee was mussed.

"Glad you're awake, Mr. Dreeber," Noakes said in a tinny voice. "'Fraid I might have tapped you behind the ear a little too hard." He giggled again.

Claude's gaze returned to Patsy.

She stood very rigid, her long, lovely throat working. "Dorothy was a bad girl, Mr. Dreeber. I loved her because she was all the family I had. But she was always getting into trouble. Lately, she's been working some blackmail badger games with Hubert here as her partner. She would start running around with a wealthy married man. Then Hubert would walk in with a camera at just the right minute, and they'd use the pictures to blackmail the married guy. They were pretty bad pictures.

"That's why those hoods tried to kidnap me in the alley the other night. One of Dorothy's suckers hired them to pick me up, hoping he could either force me to tell him where Dorothy hid the photograph negative—or he would trade me back to Dorothy for the negatives."

Tears ran down her cheeks again and she pushed her trembling fingers into her hair. "I guess Dorothy and Hubert musta been bleeding him pretty heavy and he was desperate. Today the guy came up here. He was just about nuts. He got down on his knees and begged her to ease up. She laughed at him. He got mad, started choking her. Dorothy got rattled and scared. She lost her head. There was a little automatic in her purse. She grabbed it, and in the struggle the guy was killed. The body is down in the trunk of Dorothy's car, right now.

"I had to get her out of town. I thought maybe you would loan me a little money, Mr. Dreeber. I didn't mean for Hubert to find out about it."

The man with the gun clucked his tongue. "That was selfish of them, wasn't it, Mr. Dreeber? Of course it never occurred to Dorothy that by running out of town and leaving the body, the police would uncover the whole nasty mess and I'd be left here holding the sack. At the moment, I'm as broke as both Dorothy and Patsy. I need to depart on a little vacation, too . . . and I see no need in sharing your little . . .

ah . . . loan with Dorothy. We had a slight dispute about that, and she got out her nasty little automatic again. Girl's gone positively kill-crazy. I had to do away with her."

He shifted the gun to the other hand. "Now, Mr. Dreeber, shall we discuss that little loan of twenty thousand?"

His money. That's what they were after. Now he had the answer to the whole mess. Noakes found out about his money from Patsy and he was going to steal it!

Claude Dreeber's face turned white, then green around the mouth.

Noakes consulted his watch. "A few more hours until dawn. When the bank opens, Mr. Dreeber, we'll go down and see about drawing your money out."

They sat in the cold room. Claude's back ached and his legs grew stiff. He held Patsy's hand to comfort her. Noakes didn't take the gun off them for a moment. When morning came, Noakes had Claude wash the blood off the back of his head and clean up; then they all started down to the bank.

"It'll . . . it'll have to go through Mr. Harrison, the President. I can't just walk up and draw out twenty thousand dollars without arousing a lot of suspicion."

"I don't care how you do it," Noakes said. "Just remember that I have a gun under this overcoat I'm holding over my hand. One false move—try to tip them off in any way—and I'll blast the life out of Patsy and yourself before they touch me. Remember, I'm a desperate man, Mr. Dreeber."

BEFORE entering the bank, Claude bought a couple of cigars at a newsstand. Mr. Harrison liked expensive cigars.

They walked into the bank, into Mr. Harrison's office. Claude knew Noakes and Patsy were right behind him and one wrong step would end the life of the beautiful girl he loved.

"Morning, Claude," Mr. Harrison nodded. "Late for work, aren't you?"

Dreeber introduced the other two. "I'm not going to work today. A . . . a big business deal came up. I'm going to invest some money." He took out one of the cigars. "Have a cigar, Mr. Harrison."

Harrison's mouth sagged. He looked at the cigar as if it might go off. "You're going to invest *what*?"

"I want to draw all my money out of my savings account, Mr. Harrison. Twenty thousand dollars. I'd appreciate it if I could have it right away."

"You . . . you . . . want . . ." Harrison's mouth worked silently. He seemed to have trouble getting his breath.

"Please, Mr. Harrison. Without a lot of red tape. This . . . this deal has to be taken care of immediately." Cold perspiration trickled down his back. *Don't let Patsy be hurt*, he prayed.

Harrison looked at Dreeber, then at the others. Finally, he shrugged, punched a button on his desk. The money was brought to them in cash bundles in a few minutes time. Claude put it in a manilla envelope. When they left, Harrison was still staring at the cigar on his desk top, as if it were a time bomb.

They went back to Patsy Hurley's apartment. Claude had no illusions about what might happen to them. Noakes couldn't afford to let them go free to get the police on his trail before he even left town. So far, they had only been playing for time.

Noakes faced them in the cool, dark apartment. His mouth twitched. The white circles around his eyes had widened. Sweat trickled down his face. "There's a silencer on this gun," he whispered. He giggled.

"With you two out of the way, I wouldn't have to worry. It would be days before you were found here. I could be miles away. . . ."

He seemed to be debating with himself. He reached a decision, then. The gun came up, pointed at Patsy's breast. Noakes' finger whitened on the trigger. "No!" Claude cried, and leaped at the man.

But at that moment, both the front and back doors burst inward. Noakes' fixed grin turned into a fatuous grimace. He turned his head in both directions, fired the gun wildly at the front door. The uniformed policeman there hammered out two shots with his heavy police revolver. Noakes' toupee flew off. He sat down abruptly, reaching for his head. But before his hands got half way up, he rolled over on his back and was still.

Mr. Harrison and the bank detective came in after the policemen. He was chewing savagely on the cigar Claude had given him.

"Fifteen years," he choked. "Fifteen years he's been working in the bank, and that's the first time he ever gave anybody anything—not to mention an expensive cigar. I thought there was something wrong *then*. But when he wanted to draw out his money . . ." Harrison spluttered, waved his hands hopelessly at the detective. He shoved his livid face close to the man's blank one.

"Dreeber has been in the bank fifteen years. He owns stock in the bank. Someday he'll be a vice-president. But does he keep his money in the bank? No. He doesn't trust banks. We've got vaults, detectives and Federal Insurance, but *he* doesn't trust banks. Go on, Dreeber," he said grimly, "tell 'em where you keep your money."

Dreeber blushed. "I . . . like to have it close around. . . ."

"In his mattress," Harrison choked. "Sewed up in his coat. Plastered up in the walls. That skinflint's room has more money hidden around in it than Fort Knox!"

He grabbed up the manilla envelope containing the bank's twenty thousand dollars which he'd loaned Claude Dreeber for the occasion.

Patsy Hurley walked up to him. "Don't you dare say anything against Mr. Dreeber!" She exclaimed hotly. Then she

blushed. "I . . . I think he's wonderful . . . and . . . and you couldn't run your old bank without him!"

Dreeber's heart did gymnastics. There was no mistaking the look in Patsy Hurley's eyes. He sighed. He would see that she didn't get implicated in this mess in any way. And he began wondering: now, where could he pick up a diamond engagement ring at a bargain? ♦ ♦ ♦



DEATH RIDES THIS ROAD!

By Dean Owen

I would have given an Oscar to any guy who knocked off filmland's most jaded genius, Carter Le Blanc—but when the murderer tried to reward me with top billing in a production with a gas chamber climax—I figured it was time to re-cast the show with some real good corpses!

Plus thrill-packed detective stories by Wallace Umphrey, Fletcher Flora and others in the February issue! Don't miss it!

25¢ **DIME
DETECTIVE
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On Sale December 3rd!

By
**SAM
ARCHER**



He wasn't ten yards from the road, hitching himself along on his left side, his fingers knotted in Pete's collar. . . .

The reward for capturing the killer was a good one, but it didn't satisfy Gil. The murderer—he feared—would one day return to the . . .

SCENE of the CRIME

I WAS tinkering with the speedboat when I heard Gil walking down the dock toward me. He's got a stiff knee, and he kind of swings his right leg out to the side, coming down heavier on it. I wanted to look up and wave, but I didn't.

Me and Gil wasn't getting along so good.

He hunkered down on the dock above me and said, "Morning, Captain. Still fooling with that thing?" He used to call me Pop, but now it's Captain. Most folks do call me Captain, but from Gil, it hurts.

That's the way it's been for the last two years. It made me blue, because before that me and Gil was always close. I mean, I was always trying to help him out, but now he never even asks my advice, and he low-rates me every chance he gets.

It was like this. Two years ago, a feller named Pete Elwood, that owned the charter boat *Gulf Girl*, got in an argument with another feller in a gin mill. This Pete Elwood, he had a fierce temper, and the next thing anybody knew, this other feller was laying dead on the floor with his head cracked open from a beer mug. Pete disappeared, and every cop in the state was looking for him, on account of this feller he killed turned out to be a game warden. They was looking for him from Key West to Tallahassee—and all the while he was hiding out in the palmetto not a mile away from us.

Gil was kind of shiftless in those days, always coming up with some scheme or other to make money. Except work for it. The scheme he had then was canned rattlesnake meat, and I told him he was crazy, because nobody in his right mind'd eat rattlesnake. Turned out I was right, too.

Anyway, Gil was still hunting rattlesnake when he walked into that particular patch of palmeto and found Pete Elwood. Pete had a gun, and all Gil had was a long pole with a loop on it he used to catch snake. Gil got a bullet in the knee, but he managed to jab Pete in the throat with his pole.

I tell you, it was a sensation when Gil come crawling out of that palmetto, dragging Pete after him, tied up tight. The papers had pictures as far away as Jacksonville.

I wasn't in none of the pictures, though I was the one that found him dragging Pete along. You see, Gil was gone so long that day that I got worried that maybe he'd got himself snakebit, and I started into the palmetto. He wasn't ten yards from the road, hitching himself along on his left side, his fingers knotted in Pete's collar. He was

half out of his mind from the sun and the pain in his shattered knee and he was raving like a madman, and every once in awhile he'd turn and feebly try to hit Pete with his fist. He never recognized me, and though they must of told him in the hospital I was the one that found him, he never mentioned it.

Now, while he was a hero and all that, there was a lot of kidding attached to it too, but he took it good-natured. From everybody but me. The minute I opened my mouth, he turned on me and yelled:

"What do you know about it anyway? Keep your two cents out of this. Who the hell do you think you are? Keep your mouth off me!"

I was so surprised, I just sat there. All I'd said was that the muzzle of that old gun must of looked as big as a grouper's snout.

Then Gil started to laugh and called me an old woman. And that's the way it's been ever since.

Pete was sent up for twenty years, and his boat was sold to old man Swancy that runs the boat livery out at the Point. In the next election, Gil was made our police force. We were getting five thousand tourists during the winter season, and we needed police. During the summer we drop back to two hundred.

I LOOKED at Gil, squatting up there on the dock above me. He'd changed in two years. He'd put on weight, and he looked big and confident, with wiry blond hair.

"How's the knee, son?" I asked him.

"Fine," he said. He patted it. "Just fine."

"Remember that charter I had yesterday?" I said. "That feller I took out after tarpon? He was a specialist doctor from New York, and we got to talking about your knee, and he says there's a chance it could be fixed up. It'd be kind of expensive, he says, but I got the money, Gil, and

you know you're always welcome to. . . ."

I stopped. There was no sense going on. Gil always gets a funny look in his eye when I mention his knee.

"Why don't you mind your own business, Captain?" he asked, nice-nasty. "I ain't a cripple. If I wanted an operation. I'd of had one. Is that plain enough?"

"Sure, Gil, sure."

He cocked his eye at the speedboat and said, "So long's we're passing advice around, why don't you get rid of that Christmas Tree and get yourself a real boat. This one's a joke."

The speedboat is kind of gaudy, I have to admit. It was red and white, and on the sides I had painted: *Speedboat Ride*, \$2.00, and in tourist season it runs eight hours a day at eight dollars an hour. It was twenty feet long and could do forty-five. But it was also a good, steady fishing boat. It has a big cockpit for tarpon, and I can stop it on a dime, which is what you have to be able to do when you're following the tarpon. Furthermore, when I'm out in the Gulf and see dirty weather coming, I can get in ahead of it fast. She was all boat and no joke.

Gil knew that as well as me, but for some reason he had to low-rate it. I didn't say anything. He stood up and stretched.

"Well," he said, "I really came down to run around the Bay and see what's up."

He had a boat of his own, painted gray like the Coast Guard. The town allowed his gasoline because he patrolled the Bay and kept out the commercial fishermen with their stop-nets. In no time at all, a commercial with a stop-net can clean out a Bay the size of our's and leave nothing for the rod-and-reel fisherman.

"I heard you come in last night, Gil," I said. "You got a fouled plug. Want me to look at it?" As old as I am, I'm still the best marine mechanic around.

Gil said shortly, "I'll take care of it myself," and walked down the end of the dock where his boat was tied up.

"How about a little checkers tonight, Gil?" I called after him. I didn't want him to go away mad.

"If I'm not busy," he said without looking back.

He tinkered around the engine hatch for a while, and when he purred off from the dock, I knew he'd changed the plug, because she wasn't missing no more. I knew I shouldn't of offered to change a plug for a man, but it was a little thing, and he didn't need to give me a short answer. In the old days, he'd of said, "Go ahead, Pop." I felt bad. I just couldn't seem to get near Gil anymore. He didn't want me. If we hadn't been so close, with me practically taking care of him and all, it wouldn't of been so bad—but now it was kind of lonesome.

But now I had a half promise out of him to play checkers, and I could hardly wait for night to come. We used to play checkers a lot, and mostly I beat him. I put on clean denims and a clean shirt, and got down that bottle of white lightning the feller from Georgia had sent me for catching him so much kingfish. Gil wasn't a drinking man, but he liked a nip now and then. I combed my hair. I didn't want him to call me a soppy old conch—but it was the truth that I wasn't always as neat as when I was younger.

When I walked down the street, my heart sank down out of me. There wasn't any light on in the station. The door was locked, but I knocked, hoping he might be asleep inside. The knock had that hollow sound only an empty place can give. I never felt lonesomer.

Then behind me his voice came gruff, "What're you all dressed up for, Captain?"

I tell you, I choked up because he hadn't forgot, and all I could say was, "I brought you something," and held out the bottle of corn.

He gave me a hard look and said, "Don't you know this stuff's against the law?"

"A feller sent me it from Georgia."

"Well," he kind of coughed, "in that case, we'll let Georgia worry about it. I can't touch it while I'm on duty, but I'll look into it later. Maybe it ain't moonshine at all. Bring your checkers?"

"Yessir." I showed him the board and checker box.

"Let's go then, Captain."

HE OPENED up the station. He put the bottle of corn in his desk drawer while I set up the checkers. Inside two minutes I could see he hadn't learned a thing about checkers since I played him last. He went at it slap-dash, and I had him beat in five moves. He must of seen the box he was getting himself into, because he kind of scowled and settled his elbows on the desk, hunching over the board. Right then I knew I was going to have to lose, which is a lot harder than winning if you don't want to give yourself away.

He won and gave me a funny look. "You're slowing down, Captain," he said.

"Nossir," I said, acting stubborn. "You been studying up. I had you beat, but you pulled something on me."

"If you're letting me win, Captain, you can take your . . . set 'em up. We'll try it again."

I really sweated over the next game and he practically won it fair and square. It didn't make him any less suspicious, and he didn't say a word as he slapped down the checkers, setting them up for another game—but we never got through that one.

There was a rattle and a clatter outside and this beat-up old Model A stopped at the door. A minute later, the Harvey kid busted in. He was dead white.

He looked at Gil and gasped, "Pete Elwood. He's back. He's out at the Point making old man Swaney get the *Gulf Girl* started."

Gil's big fists balled up on the desk till the knuckles showed white and pointed.

He said, "Pete Elwood?" His voice was so little it hardly seemed to come out of him.

The Harvey kid ducked his head. "Yessir, Pete Elwood. He busted out of jail. I went to old man Swaney's for shrimp bait and seen him through the winder. He's got a shotgun, and he's making old man Swaney put the head back on the engines."

I didn't need nobody to tell me what Pete had in mind. The *Gulf Girl* was a thirty-six foot custom job with extra big gas tanks and a pair of Chrysler Crowns that could drive her right along. In the *Gulf Girl*, he could make Havana, and with Havana so full of D.P.'s and foreigners these days, the chances were they'd never find him.

But worse than that, Pete Elwood would kill the old man, sure. He had to. No matter how tight he tied him up, there was always the chance he'd get loose and give the alarm. With the old man dead, nobody'd find out till morning. The old man's was the only place out there at the Point, and in the summer hardly anybody went there nights. The minute Swaney slapped the head on them Chrysler Crowns, he was a gone goose.

Which didn't give us much time.

I pushed back out of my chair and said, "Let's go, Gil!"

"I'll go," he said. He reached out and slammed me back in the chair. "Keep out of it for once, will you!" He strapped on his gun belt but somehow kept missing the hole with his buckle-tongue. He swore at it. His face was the color of a mackerel fillet. He jerked open the drawer of his desk and took out the bottle of corn. He tilted back his head and just let it run down his throat.

He saw me look at him and he said loudly, "Go and get the State cops. Take the kid's Model A. The phone's still out from the hurricane."

He pounded out of the station, still fumbling with the buckle of his gun belt. He limped fast across the street toward the dock where his boat was tied up.

There's two ways to get to the Point.

One way is by car, all the way up to the highway and around, but the shortest is straight across the Bay by boat.

The Harvey kid looked at me. "He'll get 'im," he said confidently. "He got 'im before, and he'll get 'im again, won't he, Captain Gilley?"

"Yes, boy, he'll get 'im," I said.

But right then and there I had an awful feeling, and what made it worse was that I knew the minute old man Swaney fixed them engines, two shotgun loads was going to tear straight through him. Swaney was as old as me, but a lot less spry. The kids all loved him. He always had free bait for kids, and if he had a loose boat, the first kid that asked could use it. You can't let anything happen to a feller like that.

I ran out of the station. I heard Gil's boat cough out at the end of the dock. It coughed and caught, and I heard it start to move out over the darkness of the Bay. There was no moon. I legged it down the dock and jumped in the speedboat. I felt for the keys, but they were back at the house in my old denims. By the time I ran back there and back to the dock, I couldn't hear Gil's boat out on the Bay anymore. The speedboat went out from the dock with that deep-chested roar. It rose right up on its last inch of bottom as I gave it full throttle and planed out into the Bay.

I knew Gil couldn't be more than three quarters of the way across, even with me running back and forth between the house and the dock after my keys. I turned on my big spotlight, then grabbed the wheel and gave it a jerk to starboard, because straight ahead was Gil's boat, dead in the water. I got a glimpse of him bent over the open engine hatch as I skidded by.

I made a swooping turn, came back under low throttle and drifted alongside, holding on his gunwale with my hand. His face looked bleached in the light of my spot.

His jaws moved and finally he said, "Engine cut out. . ."

I motioned him into the speedboat with

my arm. "Come on," I yelled. "We'll go in this one."

He ducked down behind the cant of the hatch. My heart froze up, because this was what I had been hoping against. I lashed the two boats together with the painter and jumped aboard. He was crouched down beside the engine like a trapped 'coon.

"Come on, Gil," I said. "We ain't got much time."

He just kind of showed his teeth and crouched away from me.

"Come on, boy," I pleaded. "You brought Pete in once before. You can do it again. . . ."

"I didn't do it once before," his voice skirled up. "You know damn well I didn't do it!"

"Are you crazy?" I said. "Who did it if you didn't?"

"*You* did. If that pole hit him, it was an accident, because I passed out when he shot me. *You* brought us out, damn you. Why didn't you tell the truth? Did you want something to hold over me? Was that it?"

ALL I could do was gape at him. "But I didn't pull you out," I stammered. "When I came on you, you wasn't more than ten yards from the road, dragging Pete behind, all tied up. I didn't have nothing to do with it."

"Get away from me!" he screeched. "You're lying. I'm not going. Did you ever have a bullet in your knee and the pain so bad they have to shoot you full of hop so you won't go crazy? Do you think I want to go through that again? He's got a shotgun. I'm not going!"

I should of stayed and had it out with him, but I didn't have no time. Old man Swaney didn't have no time. I backed off and jumped down into the speedboat. I was casting off the painter when something came down on top of me and slammed me into the cockpit. It was Gil. His face was crazy.

"And cover up for me again!" he screamed at me. "I don't want to be covered up for! I want to be left alone!"

I said, "Gil—" and tried to get up, but the boat surged out and tilted as he gave it the gun, and I went down and smacked my head against the stern. I was half dazed. A couple minutes later, he cut the engine and I heard the sand grate on the bottom as we beached. He was out and running before I could haul myself to my knees.

Then, straight ahead against the sky, I saw the high-shouldered roof of old man's Swaney's boathouse, and I gave a little prayer. I scrambled over the bow and ran up the beach after Gil. He was hunched under the window with his gun in his hand, and when I peeked in through the glass, I saw why he hadn't shot.

Pete Elwood was inside the half cabin. All you could see of him was one knee and the shotgun resting across it, pointing straight at old man Swaney, who was working on the engines. There was a desperate kind of hope in the old man's face, but you could see he really *knew* what was going to happen to him.

I heard Pete say harshly, "Snap it up. Come on, snap it up, or do you want me to come down there and snap it up for you?"

"I'll be done in ten minutes, Pete. That's all. Ten minutes. Just give me ten minutes more."

I put my hand on Gil's arm and whispered, "Look son, I'll swim around front and come up under the doors of the boathouse. You go to the side door. I'll yell to get his attention, and when you hear me yell, you bust in and let him have it."

Before I could start away, his big hand came down on my shoulder and he pushed me to my knees. I tried to twist away from him, but the strength in his fingers almost paralyzed me.

"Damn you," he said. "Oh, damn you! Why can't you ever leave me alone?"

He gave me a shove that sprawled me

in the sand and ran around the end of the boathouse. A minute later I heard the rusty rasp of hinges as he jerked open the side door.

I heard him yell, "I'm taking you in again, Pete!"

I clawed myself up to the window sill and through the window I saw Gil standing in the doorway, big and white, his gun pushed out ahead of him, his left hand holding the door jamb to steady himself. His eyes were wild and grinning.

The shotgun jerked in Pete's hands and he half rose to his feet. The gun came around, but he wasn't pointing it at anybody. He was throwing it away from himself!

"All right, Gil, all right, *all right!*" his voice was nothing but a bleat since Gil caught him in the throat with that pole back in the palmetto. "You can't shoot. I ain't armed!"

With a shock, it came over me that Pete was just as scared of Gil as Gil had been of him—and Pete wasn't a man that scared easy. But he had never got over that memory of how Gil had come up against him in the palmetto with nothing in his hands but an eight-foot pole. *And had taken him.* This time Gil had a gun.

And it was enough to scare any man, Gil busting in reckless like that.

Pete stood up under the canopy with his hands high and empty. Gil looked at him, then pushed his gun back in his holster. He was entitled to that much swagger.

He looked toward the window and called to me, "Hey, Pop, come on in here and take care of Swaney while I tie this monkey up. The old man kind of passed out."

He was ordering me around, but I didn't mind because right then I knew it was going to be all right with me and Gil again. He had grown up. But what was more important, so had I. Parents have to grow up, too.

You see, I'm his old man.

◆ ◆ ◆

GOLD-PLATED GIRL

By TALMAGE POWELL



He felt hypnotized, as if the conventions of everyday people were something to be laughed at. . . .

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Marcillene was expensive; she told Eddie that she deserved the best. But she never did mention that her real cost could only be paid in blood and honor. . . .

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HER name was Marcillene Conway. She had blonde hair and was so beautiful she turned a man's blood to searing wine. She also had a body, Eddie knew. He could feel it, warm and pliant, under his hands.

She broke the kiss, laughed, and slid away. Eddie tried to pull her back to him. He could hear the sound of his own breath—the only noise in her apartment. "No," she said, her voice neither warm nor

cool. "I'm an expensive woman. What are you, Eddie?"

"I don't know," he said, staring at her. His nostrils still held her perfume. A drop of sweat coursed down his cheek.

"I like you," Marcillene said. "Maybe too much. You're big, handsome, young, tough, strong. Why do you have to be so stinking broke?"

"Every man gets a break," Eddie said.

She stared at him frankly. "Sometimes you have to make them."

"Mine's coming," he said.

She leaned forward. "Dorman's, Eddie?"

"You never mind about that," he said. He touched the soft, beautiful cheek again with his fingers. She smiled, lazily. Eddie kissed her.

She had a strange way of becoming unreal to him. Later, when he was down on the street, the cool air of night touching the planes of his face, she assumed that unreal quality in his mind. It was strange. It was as if he were two people. Away from her, the old, quiet Eddie with the calm grin took over.

He had first seen her the day she'd come into Dorman's jewelry store. "The catch on my brooch is broken," she said.

He looked at her. Something crackled between them like a flame. He fumbled with the brooch. Dorman's could repair it, of course. She'd left an address:

Marcillene Conway,
1111 Eastover Drive,
Apartment 3-B

He'd delivered the brooch himself, late one afternoon. She'd smiled with her lips and eyes at him. She'd half hidden her eyes with her lashes, seeming to enjoy the knowledge of what her smile did to him.

"I'm on my way to dinner," Eddie had said. "Would you join me?"

"To talk about my brooch?"

"What do you think?" he'd said softly.

She'd parted her lips, and her laugh

had tinkled. His mind tried to ring a warning that here was something deadlier than dynamite. He felt hypnotized, as if the conventions of everyday people were something to be laughed at. He continued to look into the blue pools of her eyes. She'd said, "I think I like you. Come in and have a drink while I change."

He'd continued to stand a moment without moving, not knowing why he didn't move. He'd looked up and down the hallway as if seeking the sight of something to assure him that this was real. Her brows had arched coolly. Angry with himself, he'd walked through her doorway.

Into a different world.

This night when he left the nest that was her apartment he caught a crosstown bus. The night was chill, damp. When he got off of the bus he was in the midst of the human backwash of the city. Here were the cheap bars, the rooming houses with the evil-smelling hallways. Here were the dregs, the has-beens, the also-rans, the diseased of mind, body, and soul. He was oblivious to the teeming life about him. He entered a rooming house.

AT THE head of the stairs, he knocked on a door. There was the shuffle of footsteps, and an old man opened the door. Cancer had eaten away a part of the old man's nose. His eyes were hollow, his face thin. He was stooped and wore a grimy shirt and baggy pants.

He saw Eddie and slid the night chain loose. Eddie entered the room. It was an odorous hole. The cracked green blinds were drawn, and the covers rumbled on the sway-backed bed. The single light in the room was a large, shaded bulb over a work table in the corner.

The old man's breath made a whistling noise as he breathed through his diseased nose. Eddie wanted to get out of the place, to stop his skin from crawling. He said, "You ready to deliver?"

The old man smiled and opened a drawer

of the work table. He handed Eddie a small green cloth bag. Eddie shook the jewels out on his palm. They had life; they sparkled; they seemed to jump.

Eddie felt his throat gag with nervous tension. Close examination of the stones revealed them for what they were, imitations. But they were good enough to serve the purpose. Dorman would have no reason to conduct a close examination of the stones until he should sell one. Of course, that was where the big element of chance lay. Dorman might sell a diamond out of the wrong tray within hours after Eddie was gone. But it was a gamble that had to be taken. Anything big involved a gamble. With a little luck, Eddie would be on his way to Rio by the time Dorman discovered his ex-employee had substituted wrought imitations for a sackful of the real thing.

Eddie put the decoys in the green bag and the bag in his pocket. He slid a small roll of bills out of his pocket, handed it to the old man. The old man whistled through his nose and counted the money. It was all there. One hundred dollars.

It had taken Eddie three weeks to make contact with the old man. The old man had spent over half his life in different prisons. He was very wary, but now he trusted Eddie. He patted Eddie's arm, and Eddie shrank a little.

They went downstairs together. The old man turned in a bar, a rapt anticipation on his face. Eddie boarded a bus and the backwash of the city fell behind him. His passing had caused not a ripple.

Jostling homeward on the bus, the green bag burning his flesh through his pocket, Eddie thought: *I'm going to rob Dorman's.*

He should feel remorse, or at least a pang of fear. What had happened to him? Was his really Eddie Callahan who could think so coolly of robbing Dorman's?

He came from a good background. Never much dough in his family, but al-

ways respectable. His old man was an ex-cop. He'd always expected Eddie to be a cop. For three generations there had been Callahan cops.

Eddie knew he would break the chain.

He got off his bus, moving with that dream-like feeling of being cut off from reality. He knew, being honest with himself, what had happened to him: A part of him was drugged with the sweet narcotic that was Marcillene. And the addict never wishes to lose his source of supply.

He didn't consider his apartment a real home. It was just a place to flop, a place cleaned by an impersonal maid. He'd moved into the apartment weeks ago, not long after he'd met Marcillene. A place to and from which he could move without having his movements questioned.

He opened the apartment door and found Jean waiting in the bed-sitting room. For some reason the sight of her shocked the dreamy fog out of his mind. He stared at her, as if at a stranger. She was still lovely, with a slender face, a mass of gold-brown hair, a tall beautiful body. She was every bit as lovely as Marcillene, but she lacked that one thing Marcillene possessed, the pagan fascination of an unholy thing.

Jean's smile was awkward. She'd lived next door to Eddie's folks all of her life. She worked every day in a doctor's office. She was a good, straight-thinking, normal kid. She had grown up with Eddie and she loved him, but she hadn't seen him in some time now and she knew that she had lost him.

"I got the janitor to let me in, Eddie. I—hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." Eddie made his voice pleasant. He didn't want to hurt her. He just wanted to relegate Jean to the trash heap on which he'd disposed almost every element of his old life. The final element—his honesty, integrity—would land on the heap when he had Marcillene beside him in Rio, with a fortune in jewels to keep her there.

He wondered why Jean had come here.

She was a proud girl. Then he studied her face and said, "Something's wrong at home."

"Your father," she said. Then quickly: "It isn't really too serious, Eddie, but I thought you should know. He fell. His gimpy hip, you know. He bruised himself pretty badly on the cellar steps. It would make him feel better if you came over, Eddie."

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

He rode another bus, this time with Jean beside him. A stranger. Far away. Not really in his thoughts. She tried to make conversation once: "I—I haven't seen much of you for quite a while, Eddie. Why don't you come to dinner Wednesday night?"

He looked at her. He smiled. For a single instant a queer, lost feeling struck him as he wondered what his—and Jean's—lives would have been like had Marcillene not broken the catch on her brooch. . . .

"Wish I could make it," he said, "but I'm afraid I'll be busy."

She glanced away and said nothing more.

EDDIE entered the house and found everything just the same. The same lace doilies on the old, comfortable, mohair living room furniture. The same quiet. The same lingering odors of solid plain food cooked well and in abundance. His mother, he suspected, had been crying, but she was quiet now.

He slipped his arm about her, patted her shoulder, and asked about his father. The old man was bedded down in the small room off the kitchen, not in the upper bedrooms with their intervening stairs. They'd feared he had broken his hip, but the doctor had come and gone and left good word behind. No bones were broken, and as long as Tim Callahan mended satisfactorily, it wouldn't be necessary to hospitalize him.

Eddie went back to the small room. Old Tim was watching a moth play against the ceiling.

"Hi, old-timer."

"Hello, you wet-ears. How's the jewelry business?"

"Fine."

The old man tried to move and gave out a wracking groan. Eddie bent to help him shift his body. The shoulders were bony under Eddie's touch, but still filled with that rawboned wiry strength that seemed to seeth in the genes of the Callahans.

"Bruised from my ankles to my neck," old Tim said. "Blamed cellar stairs."

"You know you shouldn't have tried to go down there with that lame leg."

The old man snorted. He got comfortable again, said, "When you going to quit prissing around a jewelry store and get on the cops like a Callahan should?"

"I haven't thought much about it," Eddie said, tempering his words with a grin.

"Well, you damn well ought to think of it. You ever figure our whole civilization is based on nobody but the cop on the corner? Presidents, even, they can come and go—but you take that cop away and what you got left?"

Being a cop was a kind of sacred trust to the old man. He'd fulfilled that trust to the final call of duty. He'd been one of the straws in the broom that had made the big sweep.

The big sweep—that was the newspaper label for it. First a crime-investigating committee; then a newspaper crusade; and finally the big sweep. Squads of cops had moved into every vice and gambling dive in that city. Honkatonk strip teasers, pimps, dope peddlers had packed the jail until there was standing room only. The old man had been proud of his part in the big sweep.

The biggest name of all—Reg Siddell—was now just a number in state's prison. The king of the flesh pots, the papers had called Siddell. Suave, debonair, Siddell had laughed in the face of the judge who had sentenced him. He'd strutted out of court between two grim detectives, his battery of high-powered lawyers behind him, al-

ready planning ways of effecting his release.

Nobody had ever been able to prove that the hoodlum who'd shot the old man was really one of Siddell's boys. The hoodlum hadn't lived to tell. A screeching ambulance had carried the two of them out of the dark, cinder alley. They'd charged old Tim Callahan with plasma during the ride to the hospital, and he had lived. But he would never be the same again. The hoodlum's bullets had hit him in the guts and shattered that bone in his leg.

But the old man had never been too sorry. "It'll happen again," he'd said, "to better men than me. There'll always be punks like Red Siddell and stinking rats to take his orders. But as long as there are Callahans, the Siddells will be whipped in line, over and over if necessary, and the world will be a place for decent people to live in."

In speaking of Callahans, the old man had meant policemen, of course. The two were synonymous in his mind.

Eddie was the one who'd known bitterness, wondering sometimes if the old man hadn't made a pretty lousy bargain when he became a cop.

"Anything I can get for you?" Eddie asked.

Tim said, "Bring me a cup of that java I smell brewing in the kitchen."

The three Callahans ate sweet roll and drank coffee. At midnight, Eddie went home.

The next morning he called Marcillene. He must have awakened her. She sounded cross.

No, she could not have supper with him. Something had come up, and she might not see him for a couple of days. He was still a little sore when he entered Dorman's jewelry store.

OTTO DORMAN was short and pudgy. His round face reflected his kindness as he peered over the spectacles which rode

on his button of a nose. "Good morning, Eddie."

"Good morning," Eddie said, feeling the green bag of fake jewelry in his pants pockets.

He went behind the counter, trying to control the drumming in his temples. He was chip on a current he hadn't the strength or will to buck. Then that other part of him laughed silently and wisely at him. Did he actually *want* the strength or will?

Old man Dorman waddled up, full of talk about the morning papers. They were full of Reg Siddell's sudden, surprise release from prison. The big rackets king was again a free man. His expensive lawyers had finally started earning their fees. Siddell was going to have a new trial.

So Tim Callahan gets himself shot up—for what? Tim would take it with a shrug: "Now the boys will have to crack down again. But they get paid for it. Who expects to erase the vermin? But we can keep them from eating the house from under us. It's a never-ending process, that's what it is."

Eddie groused his way through lunch and most of the afternoon. That green bag grew heavier in his pocket. He realized that Dorman was speaking his name: "Eddie, up front, please. A customer is waiting for service."

Eddie moved to the front of the store. The man standing there was familiar. His picture had been in a lot of papers. He was Reg Siddell.

Eddie felt a wave of heat crawl across the back of his neck. He thought: *Here is the punk whose setup made it possible for my old man to get shot.*

Eddie glanced through the front window. At the curb was parked a long, black car. Two big men with hard, bold faces were waiting beside the car for their boss. Siddell was certainly the kind who grabbed what he wanted, who had people jump when he opened his mouth.

Siddell strutted faintly. "I want to buy a diamond-studded watch."

Eddie looked at him. "This way," he said.

While Siddell pawed over the tray of wrist watches Eddie put on the counter, Eddie gave him a going over with his eyes.

A gross body in a new suit that must have cost two hundred berries. Custom-made gloves on the counter beside the pudgy, manicured hand. A face with heavy jowls barbered until it was pink. And over it all an air of slime.

Or maybe that's only my imagination, Eddie thought.

Dope king selling to teenagers, he remembered. Boss of the fleshpots. Cop killer. Graft. Hoodlum.

Sewer rat.

"This little number will do," Siddell said. "Here's the address for delivery. I want it there today."

Eddie handed him a white card. Siddell wrote on it, handed over a horse-choking chunk of cash for the platinum, diamond-studded watch he'd chosen.

Then Siddell went out. Through the window, Eddie watched Siddell get in the big, black car, watched it sweep from the curb in a surge of power.

EDDIE stood there with the white card and the watch in his hands, and blood came in a haze to his eyes. For a second he was so damned mad he felt he wanted to vomit; then that passed and he was able to laugh at himself. Where had he been all these past weeks? What kind of crazy thoughts had passed through his mind? He felt suddenly as if he had just awakened from a nightmare.

Otto Dorman frowned at him, and came walking over.

"Anything wrong, Eddie?" The man was genuinely concerned.

"Wrong? No, just getting right. I'm going to quit working here, Mr. Dorman."

"That's too bad. I like you, Eddie. A nice boy. Very trustworthy."

Eddie felt the weight of that green bag in his pocket. Sometime he would tell old man Dorman about it. Later, when Dorman would understand.

Dorman asked, "What are you planning to do?"

"I'm going to try to get on the cops," Eddie said. "It's a job that's never finished. But things would be tough on you without them."

"That's very true, Eddie. I wish you luck. I know you'll make good and do your job right."

Dorman strolled to the back, and Eddie picked up the phone, dialed the office where Jean worked. She answered, and Eddie said, "About that dinner Wednesday night—I think I'll be able to make it after all, Jean."

"Oh, Eddie! That's swell."

"And if you're not doing anything tonight. I mean, I'd like to see you. I have a delivery to make when I leave here. A very fancy watch a guy just bought. I want to make the delivery in person."

Jean sounded very happy when she told him she wouldn't be busy tonight. She didn't sound at all like Marcillene. Eddie knew now why Marcillene hadn't wanted to have lunch with him, and why she wouldn't be able to see him for the next few days. He felt a rash of fear as he thought what a near damn fool he'd been. Well, Marcillene would never see him again.

"This delivery, Eddie," Jean was saying. "Will it take long? Is it far?"

Just to another world and back, that was all. But Eddie didn't say it. He looked at the card Siddell had given him, the card bearing the address where the very fancy ladies platinum, diamond-studded wrist watch was to go:

Marcillene Conway
1111 Eastover Drive,
Apartment 3-B





THE OTHER MAN

The prosecutor could prove Blount guilty of murder. Yet Blount knew he had an unbreakable alibi. And they were *both* wrong!

By V. E. THIESSEN

IT SEEMED to Hugh Blount that the prosecuting attorney was getting uncomfortably accurate in his guesswork. Blount had taken the stand in his own defense and was having a rather bad time being cross-examined.

The prosecutor said slowly, "Now, Mr. Blount, I am going to tell you what really happened. You returned from a business trip the night of March twenty-ninth. You found the note from your wife telling you she had left you for another man. You are a

violent man and you were enraged. You did not know what to do until you found a cigarette lighter in the apartment, an expensive cigarette lighter engraved with the name Michael. Do you recall the lighter, Mr. Blount?"

Blount thought quickly. Had he left fingerprints on the lighter? He wasn't sure. He said, "I may have seen the lighter. I am not sure. I was upset."

"You thought the lighter belonged to the man who had stolen your wife."

"No! I don't remember thinking anything about it."

"You knew your wife did not expect you for another day. You thought the man might miss his lighter and come back for it. You loaded your gun and waited. You had a gun in the apartment, Mr. Blount?"

"Yes, I had a gun." In spite of the trap he had prepared Blount had trouble keeping his voice calm.

The prosecutor lashed out, "And when a man came into the apartment at two o'clock in the morning you shot him. You shot him, never knowing that he was not involved at all, that he had rented the apartment from your wife the day before."

The defense attorney was on his feet, objecting.

The judge's voice was curt, "Sustained."

But the thought had reached the jury. Blount could see that.

The prosecutor hammered another point home. He said, "Your wife owned the apartment. Could she rent it without consulting you?"

"Yes."

"In fact, your wife had all the money. She had been supporting you the last year, all the time you treated her so cruelly."

"Not exactly."

"But you had received sums of money from her." The prosecutor was remorseless.

"Yes."

"This other man had stopped all that, hadn't he? Yet you expect us to believe that at the time of the shooting you were discussing your wife's desertion with a friend, a friend whom your own attorney did not even ask you to identify?"

"Yes." Blount could feel himself growing tense, eager. The prosecutor had taken the bait.

"And who is this friend whom you have been so careful not to involve?"

Blount looked at the judge.

The judge advised the prisoner, "Your life is at stake, Mr. Blount. It would be best to answer the question."

Blount said gently, "My friend was John Harriman," and relaxed into the witness chair. Surprise whispered around the courtroom, and the prosecutor said quickly, "No more questions."

Blount was grinning as he came down from the chair.

IT HAD been a stroke of genius to involve Harriman, Blount felt. He had known Harriman since college days, and if they were not friends, at least they were acquaintances, and Harriman was his banker. Harriman had a name for integrity in this town. If Harriman said Blount had been at his apartment from one to three in the morning, then the jury would know that, unquestionably, he had been there.

It had been good timing too, Blount told himself, to let the prosecutor himself dig out Blount's alibi. He closed his eyes, remembering Harriman, good old stupid, honest Harriman, who never locked his door, and who slept like a log. It had been simple to walk into Harriman's apartment, turn the clocks and Harriman's watch back to one o'clock, then shake Harriman awake, and bewail his misfortune.

And Harriman had been most helpful. He had talked for a couple of hours, talking Blount out of all the wild things he threatened to do and had even put him to bed in the living room.

It had been simple enough to turn the watch and the clocks back up after Harriman had fallen asleep again.

Blount's counsel was on his feet, smiling confidently. He said, "The defense calls as its last witness, John J. Harriman."

The courtroom stilled into respectful silence, and Harriman took the oath. He was a big man, well dressed and immaculate, yet with something common about him, as though all these clothes were a front, and he really belonged in overalls, tossing hay to the horses. His voice was deep and cultured. He smiled once, and everyone in the courtroom was his friend.

The defense counsel asked, "Do you recall Mr. Blount's visit to your dwelling on the twenty-ninth of March? Did he awaken you on that evening?"

"Yes. As I recall, he shook me awake. I am a heavy sleeper, and was in need of sleep."

"He shook you? How did he get into your apartment?"

Harriman smiled. "I presume he rang the bell, and, as I didn't answer, he walked in. I seldom lock my door, and sleep quite soundly. Blount knew that from our college days."

"Did you look at your watch when he awakened you?"

"Yes."

"What time did it show?"

"One o'clock in the morning."

"What did Blount want to see you about?"

"He was quite broken up. His wife had left him, and he was disturbed emotionally. He was hardly rational."

"Do you think this emotion was genuine?"

"Oh! Yes. He was really upset. He had reason to be."

"How long did you talk?"

"About two hours."

"How do you fix that time? Did you look at your watch again?"

"Yes."

"After that what happened?"

"I put Blount to bed in the living room."

"Your watch is accurate, Mr. Harriman?"

"Yes, I set it each morning with the radio."

"You checked it the next morning as usual?"

"Yes. It was perhaps a half minute fast."

The defense counsel smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Harriman. Cross-examine." He sat down.

The courtroom was quiet, stunned. Blount must be clear. The sound of the shot and the finding of the body clearly

placed the murder at just after two in the morning.

BLOUNT watched the prosecutor struggle gamely to his feet and ask, without hope, "You are sure that Blount was in your apartment from one until three in the morning?"

Harriman said, "No, sir!"

Blount stared, and whispered to his counsel, "What's he trying to do?"

The prosecutor said slowly, "I do not understand. You told me—you testified that you looked at your watch."

"I did. Someone had turned it back. Then, after I went back to sleep, someone turned it forward again."

Panic began to rise in Blount. He scowled at Harriman, saw one of the spectator's looking at him, and forced his face back into a smile.

The prosecutor was awake now, as alert as a questing hound. "How did you know your watch had been tampered with?"

Harriman said, "I was out with a friend that evening. I did not go to bed until two in the morning."

And with those words, Blount knew his chances were gone. Yet still he fought, leaping to his feet, screaming: "You lie—You dirty liar!"

His counsel was game too. Even a man like Harriman might lie. On re-examination he asked swiftly, "Is there someone else who can support your story. Someone who will testify that you were out past one o'clock?"

The crowd hung on the answer. It believed in Harriman, but if he had lied? What a scandal that would make!

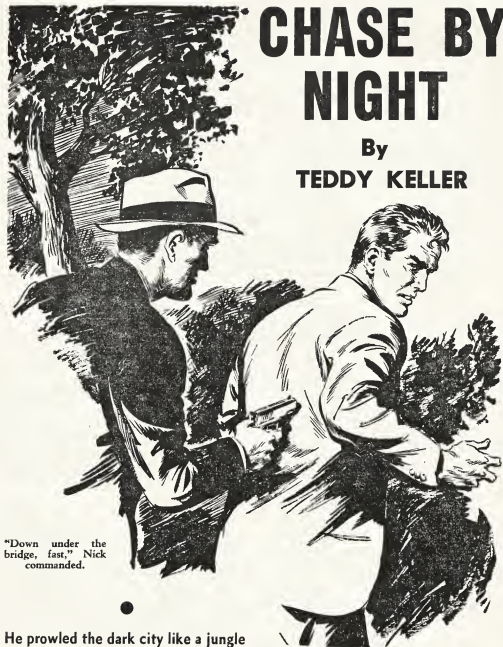
"Yes," Harriman said, "My friend will testify."

"Who is this friend?"

The man on the witness stand was John J. Harriman, and was Truth. There was no longer a doubt in the crowded courtroom. He said heavily, "I was out with Mrs. Blount. I am the other man." ♦ ♦ ♦

CHASE BY NIGHT

By
TEDDY KELLER



"Down under the
bridge, fast," Nick
commanded.

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He prowled the dark city like a jungle
beast, and if he ever found the rat
who had destroyed his life, he'd show
no more mercy than a man-killing
tiger!

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A CHUBBY guy, a two-burgers-with-onions regular, went out and Jim Pendleton sagged back against the steamtable. He glanced at Sarah, wondering how he could be so lucky. Her short, ripe figure defied the limp uniform and her upswept hair was proudly in place. She

turned, caught his gaze and a smile danced across her pixie face.

"Tired?" he asked, smiling back.

"I'm dead." She leaned against the counter near the cash register. "How about you, Dad?"

Barney flipped a slice of pickle into his wide mouth. There was no sag in his stocky frame. "Me. I'm fine. You young squirts can't take it."

"A Siberian salt mine would be a vacation," Sarah said. "Golly, what a weekend."

"A little more of this," Jim told her, "and I'll have the cash to go partners on *Barney's Burger Palace Number Two*." He grinned. "Then, Shorty, I'll take you away from all this. Instead of toiling for your old man, you can slave for me."

Sarah groaned noisily, then laughed. "Out of the frying pan into another frying pan. How about calling it a night?"

Jim glanced at his watch as a car stopped in front. "Two minutes till midnight. Just time for this customer."

He saw Sarah straighten as he turned to the grill. Beside him Barney turned his back to the door to pop an onion slice into his mouth. Jim heard Sarah greet the customers, then heard her suck in a quick breath. He whirled and felt his own breath catch in his throat. Two men stood just inside the door. Both were masked and both held automatics.

"Don't anybody move," said the tall one. "We aren't fooling."

Jim stared hard at the two men. Only their eyes were visible between the hatbrims and handkerchief masks. But something about them rang a bell.

"Come around the counter," the short man said. "Take it slow and keep your hands in sight."

Jim saw the anxiety in Sarah's eyes as she turned. It wasn't the gunmen that bothered her. This looked bad for Jim and they all knew it.

When they were herded in front, the

short man hurried to the cash register and scooped the contents into a cloth bag. Jim glanced at Barney, hoping he wouldn't try anything. The gunmen meant business. Besides, the loss would be covered by insurance.

"Who's gonna open the safe?" the short one asked.

"It . . . it's a time lock," Jim fumbled. "Can't open it till tomorrow."

"The hell it is," the short man snorted. "I'll open it!"

"No," Barney protested suddenly. "You can't do this."

He shrugged off Jim's restraining hand and moved toward the man behind the counter. Jim grabbed for him, but not in time. The blast of an automatic pounded his ears. Sarah cried out as Barney crumpled to the floor.

"Freeze!" the tall man snapped, swinging his smoking gun to Jim.

Peering helplessly down at Barney, Jim heard the safe open. A moment later the short man scurried around the counter, reeling under the weight of his loot. His eyes bugged excitedly. "Thanks, Jimmie-boy," he said puffing. "You been real helpful."

SARAH'S head bobbed up and Jim saw the deadly accusation in her eyes. He faced the gunmen and suddenly knew them.

The tall man paused at the door as his companion headed for the car. "Don't turn stoolie again, Pendleton," he said. "I'd hate for something to happen to the girl." His voice developed a sneer. "Better come along and get your cut."

Jim felt the movement beside him. Sarah's voice was biting at his ear. "Go on with them, you cheap crook. Or are they supposed to kill me first so I won't implicate you?"

He turned to her, pleading. "Sarah, let me—"

"Get out!" she cried, her voice rising hysterically. "They shot Dad—they got the money. What else do you want? Get out!"

A screech of tires brought Jim around. The getaway car was fading down the street. He wheeled toward the phone, but Sarah blocked his way. She sprang at him, nails tearing at his face. He lurched back, slapped her hard and raced to the phone. When he finished he found her on the floor beside Barney. He lit a cigarette and waited.

It didn't take the white coat men long to load Barney into an ambulance and whisk him away. Jim smoked another cigarette while Sarah told Police Captain Miller what had happened. Then a police car sped her to the hospital and Jim was left with Miller.

"Is this the way an ex-con keeps his nose clean?" Miller asked. "Your parole board isn't going to like it."

Jim dropped his cigarette to the floor and moved around the counter. "I don't suppose there's any point in telling you I had nothing to do with it." He turned off the fires under the grill, the steamtable and the coffee.

"I go on facts," Miller said. He moved to the counter, watching.

Jim poured himself a cup. "Coffee?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Thanks. Fingerprint boys didn't find a print and the Barnes girl couldn't tell us anything." He stirred sugar into his cup. "Guess it's up to you to make identifications."

"Doughnut?" Jim asked, breaking open a package.

Miller tossed a bill to the counter. "Who were they?"

"Got anything smaller?" Jim inquired, smiling. "Fresh outta change, you know."

"Some of the old gang?"

Jim nibbled at his doughnut and pushed the bill away. "It's on the house. But don't expect it next time."

"Pendleton, if Barney dies it'll be rough on you. Your only chance is to tell us who those mugs were and I'll try to clear you." He dunked a piece of doughnut. "Now—

you start answering my questions, son."

"Sure." Jim said, putting down his cup. "I talk and they get Sarah. Then they holler their heads off that I was in on the deal. No, thanks."

"The girl will be safe enough," Miller said. "And I'll see that you get every break possible."

Jim took a long pull at his coffee. "Look. I don't give a damn about the cops or the parole board or whether I go back for life. Right now, my girl thinks I was in on a deal to bump her old man. There are two guys who can tell her different." He drained his cup and set it down. "And I don't have a police commissioner telling me not to use a rubber hose. They'll tell her the truth—that I wasn't in on it."

"If you weren't, how'd they know the safe combination?"

Jim shrugged and moved to a row of switches on the wall. He peered through a window, flipped a switch and the lights outside the building went dark. "You going to lock me up?"

"Have to," Miller said, finishing his coffee. "Ex-con—safe combination—withholding identity of bandits."

"I'm sorry about that," Jim said, turning. He glanced into the back room and his hand inched along the wall. He jerked down on the switches and the building went black. He was at the back door before Miller recovered and shouted. He snatched up a bundle of his clean-up clothes and sprinted into the welcome darkness. It took only a moment to change into the darker clothing.

A half hour later, Jim was in a part of town he hadn't seen for years—now since he'd been part of a wild, young stickup gang. But he wasn't likely to see much of the place now if he didn't watch himself. Miller had lost no time putting out the alarm. The place was crawling with prowling cars.

He ducked into a dim tavern and peered through the thick, stale smoke. No luck.

As he went out he grabbed an empty whiskey bottle off a table. A second joint also yielded no trace of the men he sought. In a third his luck was no better.

Then, as he moved along the deserted sidewalk, a prowling car swung toward him, its spotlight probing into every doorway. Jim put down the empty bottle and sprawled beside it. The inquisitive finger of light poked at him and he rolled his face away from the brightness. He moved his lips and moaned a tuneless song.

"Got no time for luses tonight," said a voice from the car.

When the police car was out of sight, Jim scrambled up, leaving his bottle. He hurried to another tavern and looked in. There at the bar was the short gunman. Jim moved beside him.

"Hello, Willie," he said.

WILLIE jumped a foot. He spun and his hand groped inside his coat. His eyes bugged with fear.

"Take it easy," Jim said, laying a hand on Willie's arm. With exaggerated calm he took out a cigarette and lit it. "Where's Nick?"

"Why you wanta know?" Willie blurted. His gun hand fiddled nervously along his lapel; the other worried a shot glass.

Jim sucked smoke deep into his lungs. "He told me to come along and get my cut."

"Yeah?" Willie flicked a lock of matted hair away from his buggy eyes. "You mean you're comin' back with us?"

"Sure," Jim said smoothly. "This working for money is strictly for somebody else." He glanced idly around the nearly-deserted room and wondered if the barkeep's drowsiness was real. "Where's Nick?" he asked finally.

"He . . . he's losin' the hot car." Willie made an effort to relax and Jim knew he was trying to figure what Nick would do in this situation. He must have decided to play it smart. "Want a drink?"

"Sure," Jim said amiably. He watched the gun hand move away from the lapel. Then he grabbed at it with his left, twisted it up behind Willie's back and snatched his gun. "Outside," he muttered.

He dug the gun into Willie's back and saw the barkeep's eyes flutter once. The guys at the corner table ignored them completely. He watched the bartender and backed away. He was almost out the door when a gun jabbed into his ribs.

"Hand the rod to Willie," Nick said, "and don't make any noise."

Jim gave up the gun and turned. Even in the darkness he could see the slash of Nick's white teeth and the sleek cut of a two-hundred-dollar suit. He caught the glint of gold cuff links as a hand flashed at his face. He jerked his head back, but the slap rocked him.

"You should be nice to your old friends." Nick said, "or you might get hurt. It wouldn't take much to make me awful mad." There was a knife edge in his cool voice. "You know, it's not right that my brother should be rotting in stir just because you decided to sing." He slapped hard again.

"I told you I was sick of the deal and wanted out," Jim said, rubbing his stinging face. "I warned you I'd talk if I had to."

"So now you're out and my brother's in," Nick said. He swung at Jim again, then dusted his palm and said, "You didn't contact me when you got out. What do you want now?"

"I want to clear myself with my girl."

Nick laughed. "That's real noble—right out of a story book." He shrugged. "Well, maybe I'll help you."

Jim stared at the dapper gunman. He let his guard relax for a moment and knew it was foolish. Too late he saw Nick's gun hand chop at his skull. He felt the dizzy pain and saw a million stars dance through his head. Then the stars faded and he fell.

A long time later he sat up in a dark

doorway. He staggered to his feet, fighting giddiness. He stumbled to the tavern. He gave his head a minute to clear, then went in.

The bartender was still dozing on his stool. The eyes fluttered when Jim entered, but he didn't move. Jim went to the bar, reached across and shook the round man behind it.

"Where'd they go?" he demanded.

The barkeep slid off his stool, wagging his head sleepily. "Whassa matter?" he mumbled.

Jim grabbed the man's shirt front and yanked him against the bar. "Where are they?"

"Who?" The fat face trembled.

Jim slapped the blubber. "Don't stall. You know what I'm talking about. Where are Nick and Willie?"

The watery eyes that gazed up at Jim were glazed with fear. "They . . . they're gonna snatch a car—beatin' it outta town—heading north."

Jim released the man. "That'd better be the truth." He moved down to the cash register, lay across the bar and probed the shelves beneath. He came up with a big revolver and grinned. "Thanks."

Not daring to take a cab or to try to reach his own jalopy, Jim hiked. It took a half hour to reach a vantage point near the edge of town. He posted himself near a stoplight where the street was light enough and the traffic slow enough for him to make out driver's faces. He shoved the pistol into his jeans and closed his battered jacket over it. Now he must wait. His only concern was that Nick and Willie might have gotten out of town too soon.

He was on his fourth cigarette when he realized he'd been there an hour. That was too long. What could have happened? He was going strictly on the barkeep's word. That was it—the damn barkeep! Why hadn't Jim seen it before? One slap wasn't enough to pry information out of anyone who didn't want to spill. It all

added to nothing but a hastily-rigged plant.

He stepped out of the shadows, his thoughts churning furiously. Where would they be? He was too familiar with the old haunts and Nick knew it. Nick was too smart to lam into unfamiliar territory where he'd be picked up more easily. Then they were still in town. But where?

Jim paced the sidewalk, thinking, probing. Then he knew. Where else but the same tavern? They could join that drunken group in the corner and the barkeep would swear they'd been there all evening. And Nick was smart enough to put up one more barrier in his defenses. Probably long before now the bartender had phoned the police to say that Jim had been in there. Now the place would be guarded—with the quarry inside.

"Hey, you—you there. C'mere."

Jim's head snapped up and he cursed himself for an idiot. A cop was leaning out the window of a prowler car at the curb. But the cop had both hands on the sill and neither one of them held a gun.

JIM shuffled forward a step, then pivoted and raced toward the corner. As he made the turn he heard the screech of tires. A spotlight caught him an instant before he plunged into the dark alley. A fire escape appeared beside him. He leaped, caught the bottom rung and hauled himself up. The police car skidded into the alley and stopped directly below him. He inched up the ladder, watching the spotlight glide among the shadows.

He gazed the roof and watched the cops below. They'd have the alarm out soon, if not already, and he had no time to lose. He located the roof door, but found it locked. Moving soundlessly he crossed to the next building and another locked door. He was near the end of the block when he found a door that rattled a bit. He seized the knob, jerked hard and the door came open, dangling an uprooted hook.

Pre-dawn traffic was heavier on the high-

way when Jim reached it again. He heard a distant wail of sirens coming closer and hesitated in a moment of agonized indecision. A heavy cattle truck moved away from the spotlight at the corner. A car and smaller truck passed the giant and then there was nothing close behind.

As the truck pulled toward him, Jim stepped into the street. He ambled to the middle and waited for the monster to pass. He walked casually behind it, out of sight of the driver's rear-view. Then he turned and sprang, clutching at the slats of the back end. A sleepy-eyed cow blinked at him, closed her eyes and chewed her cud. A police car, with siren screaming, flashed past.

Jim parted company with the cow and ran the last few blocks to the tavern. He slipped into a doorway a block distant and watched. A prowling car was slowly circling the block. He waited while it crept past the joint, reached the corner finally, and turned. He came out of the door and ran to the front of the tavern. Again he waited, giving the cops time to make the turn on the far side of the block.

Blood was pounding in his temples as he hauled out the revolver. He eased forward and kicked the door open. In the corner, Willie's skinny head swung around, the eyes bugged out. Jim thumbed the hammer back and snapped a shot above the seated men.

Willie bolted up, overturning his chair. Nick grabbed at him and missed as Willie scrambled to a back door.

"Stop, you fool!" Nick yelled. "That's what he wants." He kicked the table aside and sprang after Willie. "Stop!"

Jim pulled back from the door and raced in the direction the cops had gone. Their motor roared on the far side of the block. They'd be circling fast.

When he got to the alley the back door of the tavern was open. He melted into the shadows and moved closer. Nick was a vague silhouette in the dim light.

"Willie," Nick whispered. "Come back, you idiot."

Near the tavern door a trembling shadow moved apart from the other shadows. Jim flipped a shot at it. Willie screamed in pain and folded, clutching at his leg. Nick crouched and made a dive toward his companion. Jim fired in front of him, driving him back. Willie was the man he wanted. With only a little coaching, the punk would sing beautifully to Sarah.

Jim made a desperate rush and got to Willie. He pocketed the thug's gun and bent to hoist him to his shoulders. The sound of voices and the pound of heavy boots brought him up. He jumped back behind a trash barrel just as Nick's sport shoes clicked past at a dead run.

"There he goes. Hey! Halt or I'll fire!"

Jim peered over the barrel and saw a cop leveling a gun at Nick's fleeing figure. There was no time to debate the matter. They'd get Willie and Jim couldn't prevent it. If they got Nick too, the gunmen would sing the song that would implicate Jim. He preferred a different chorus. But to hear it he had to keep the cops off Nick.

The revolver roared once as Jim brought it up. He saw the cop falter, surprised, and forget Nick. Behind him, his buddy hesitated, then stepped boldly into the alley. Jim triggered a slug into the side of the door and both cops ducked back. He slipped away from the barrel and moved quickly to a telephone pole. Turning, he saw a cop dash from the tavern, covered by the other's gun. He jerked the trigger twice and both cops sprawled, but came up at once. He knew they'd heard that empty click the second time.

"Give up," one of the cops yelled. "Your gun's empty."

Jim pocketed the revolver and brought out Willie's automatic. Leaning against the pole, he aimed for a spot above a cop's head. Suddenly a slug whined past his ear, chewing a hunk out of the pole. He whirled and saw Nick duck out of the alley.

The shot had dropped the cops again and Jim eased away from the pole. He saw one of them scramble up. A gun flashed and the bullet ripped through Jim's sleeve. He fired once, pinned them down and backtracked. He saw a slight movement and flipped two shots, then drifted into the shadows. He yanked the revolver from his pocket and waited. When he saw movement again he threw the gun, and a moment later it clattered to the pavement behind the cops. They turned and he sprinted for the street. A flurry of shots cut loose as he dived around the corner and he felt the searing heat of a slug graze his shoulder.

A block ahead, Nick darted into another alley. Jim could hear Police sirens converging on the area and he wondered if the cops weren't tired of chasing back and forth across town.

HE WAS almost to the next alley when the two cops opened up behind. The shots came too close and he poured on the steam. Then a slug tore through his flapping jacket. He grabbed at his side, staggered and pitched headlong into the alley. It was a desperate stall, but he had to chance it. Nick might take the bait. His elbows felt bloody and his body ached from the hard fall, but he lay still.

Then Nick's voice came out of the darkness. "If you're hurt, it's tough—but I'm not coming over there to see if you're pulling a stunt." The sport shoes clicked down the alley.

Cursing, Jim sprang up and ran. In the middle of the block he found an intersecting alley and saw Nick's figure moving in the direction of the tavern. He was playing it real cagey—doubling back where the cops would least expect him.

Jim moved to the other side of the intersection as the cops burst into the far end of the alley. He fired twice and saw them dive for cover. That would make them think he'd gone the other way. He flopped to his stomach and snaked across the alley.

Then he got up and ran after Nick. For the next half hour, Jim's glimpses of Nick were only fleeting. He was holding the trail, though, and pulling closer as the gunman tired. Nick couldn't use his gun for fear of drawing cops. But Jim couldn't fire either. The sky was brightening and he was reminded of his own weariness. He'd been almost constantly on the run since late evening and felt that he couldn't last much longer.

Nick's steps were faltering now, Jim saw, as the gunman left a residential district and ran into a park. Through sheer force of will, Jim summoned up new strength and raced along a sanded path, less than fifty yards behind. Then Nick was lost from sight around a bend. When Jim had made the turn he found two paths leading off and Nick had disappeared.

He stared frantically down one path and then the other. He mustn't lose now that he was so close and both were so tired. But which way? One path lost itself in a maze of shrubbery. The other lead over an arching footbridge. Possibly from that higher point, Jim thought, he could spot his man.

He hurried to the bridge and turned slowly, searching in all directions. The faint scrape of a shoe should have warned him, but he was too tired to notice. A gun gouged into his back.

"Down under the bridge—fast," Nick commanded. He was breathing heavily and Jim felt the gun tremble.

The gulley beneath the little bridge was dry. Jim sank to the grass and sucked in great gulps of air. When his breathing returned to normal, he lit a cigarette. He was relieved of his gun.

"They get Willie?" Nick asked.

"Yeah." Jim stretched out and let his muscles relax.

"Damn you," Nick whispered. "I ought to take you in myself—and tell 'em you and Willie pulled the job."

Jim felt strength ebbing back to his worn

body. "It's nice here. Think I'll have a nap. What're you going to do?"

"I've gotta get to my lawyer," Nick muttered thoughtfully. "Willie'll sing the right song if I keep him paid. For a price I can find a fall guy to take my rap." He glared down at Jim and added, "Then maybe I'll make an anonymous call to the cops and tell them where to find you. That'll even us."

Jim yawned. "Don't hurry. I need my sleep."

"On your feet," Nick said, prodding with both guns.

Jim stood and banged his head against a low girder. He rubbed his scalp gingerly. "I'm up."

"Your belt." Nick pocketed Willie's gun and put out a hand. "No tricks," he cautioned.

Jim handed over the belt and, at Nick's command, moved up under an end of the bridge. Again he sat.

"On your side and hands in back," Nick said. "I'll hook you up to this girder and make sure I get clear. I'll send somebody to turn you loose just before the cops get here."

"That's good of you."

Jim felt Nick fumbling with the belt and his hands. It was going to be quite a chore, one-handed. But Nick was wary. He held back as far as possible.

Finally, Jim heard an impatient curse and felt the gunman lean over him. He inched his legs out for leverage, then flipped backwards. He felt Nick's knees in his side and heard a ringing thud as Nick's head slammed into the girder.

Jim rolled to his stomach, pinning the thrashing legs. He tugged at his hands and felt skin peel as they came free. Nick got a leg loose and kicked viciously at Jim's shoulder. Jim tumbled to the bottom of the gully, his left shoulder numb.

He scrambled to his feet and saw Nick standing clear of the bridge, clawing at the guns in both pockets. Jim ran two steps

and launched a flying tackle. He saw Nick's knee jerk up, but got his arms around it. The momentum of his dive drove Nick back, toppled him. Jim rolled clear and got to his knees. When Nick came up, still pawing for a gun, Jim swung. His punch clipped Nick's jaw, rocked him back. He followed with a fast one-two and Nick folded.

THE Barnes home wasn't far from the park. Jim had Nick up on the front porch before the gunman's head had cleared. He opened the door and shoved Nick inside. Sarah was curled in the chair by the radio.

"Sarah," he said, moving inside. "How's Barney?"

"Good morning, gentlemen." It was Miller's voice.

Jim heard the door swing shut behind him and felt the pistol in his back. This gun-in-the-ribs routine was getting old, he thought. Then Nick spun around, vengeance in his eyes.

"Captain Miller," he said. "I knew Pendleton was in on this deal. I tried to get him before he shot up all my boys." His voice sounded pained. "I tried to keep them all straight, but Jim wanted to pull this job."

Jim felt the weight of the guns leaving his pockets. Miller's practiced hand probed for more.

"He shot Willie," Nick continued, "and he said he was going to shoot up the guys who wouldn't go in on the deal."

So quickly had Nick launched into his spiel that nobody had moved. Jim was still just inside the door with a gun in his back. But the back might as well have been against a wall. This was his last stand. Nick had a good frame, and a few minutes with his lawyer or at a phone would sew things up tight. Jim knew that his only hope was to get the truth out of Nick. And he had to do it now.

He lowered his head and let his body

sag, presenting a convincing picture of guilt. The pressure of the gun against his spine lessened. He saw tears of confusion and distress in Sarah's eyes.

"Pendleton," Miller said, "I'm disappointed in—"

He broke off as Jim whirled, chopping at the pistol. The gun dropped to the rug. Miller grabbed for the two automatics on a table and Jim lunged at him. Nick dived for the gun on the floor. Jim drop-kicked the wrist. He snatched up the pistol and covered the men while he collected the automatics.

"Okay, Miller," he said breathlessly. "Over there by Sarah."

The cop didn't budge. His voice was flat. "This time you've gone too far. I thought you might have been suckered in. But you just proved your guilt, as far as I'm concerned."

Trying to ignore him, Jim glanced to Sarah. "How's Barney?"

She hesitated, unable to meet his eyes. "He'll be all right."

"Sarah, I . . ."

Miller's eyes flicked momentarily. Jim whirled as Nick sprang at him. Jerking the trigger, he leaped back. Nick slammed belly-down onto the rug. He glared up at the pistol.

"Next time I won't miss," Jim said, nodding to a hole in the wallpaper. His voice went hard. "Take that straight chair, Nickie-boy, and no funny stuff."

Nick got up. Jim waved the gun and Miller moved to the arm of Sarah's chair. Covering them, Jim pulled an extra dining room chair into the middle of the room. He shoved Nick onto it.

Jim dumped the automatics on the divan behind him and waggled Miller's revolver under Nick's nose. "Friend," he said, "the penalty for robbery and putting a slug into a nice gent isn't too bad. They won't put you away for long. You'll still be young enough to look good to some girls with poor taste."

Gently, he rubbed the barrel of the gun along Nick's jaw. "That is, unless your face is all scarred up."

Hate boiled into Nick's eyes. "You wouldn't dare," he snarled. "Not with a cop as witness."

"Why not?" Jim asked smoothly. "I've got nothing to lose."

Nick's face paled. "Miller. You can't let him. Do something!"

(Continued on page 111)



FULL MOON

By Talbot Mundy

That lovely Wu Tu was mistress of devilish intrigue, with the power of ancient India's magic at her crimson finger tips, Warrender knew. . . . But where, why, and how had she spirited away the man who had balked her latest plans? And what dread revelation awaited Warrender at trail's end across that dark and brooding land, where deep in the caverns of a ruined jungle keep of Gaglajung in Rajputa, legend said, was locked the dread mystery of mysteries which no man had seen—and lived?

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Slay, Maestro, Slay!

A Terror-Packed Novelette

By ROBERT TURNER

None of the musicians he preyed on knew *The Maestro's* real identity except—maybe—the ones he killed. So Blackie Blair set out to meet the killer, to the measured strains of his own funeral march!

BLACKIE BLAIR came over Fiftieth Street from Broadway and saw the boys in their regular spot in front of the Union Hall near Sixth. He put on a little swagger as he swiveled through the crowds which poured from the early show at Radio City. He straightened his worn tie, cocked his cheap felt at a rakish angle.

Right into the middle of the gang he swept with a grin on his mouth. Just as

though he still belonged. Just as though he'd never been away. But his heart was pounding so he could hardly breathe. Pulses in his wrists thumped crazily.

He went up to Jake Watson. Jake and Blackie had played their first big time job together. Jake had played sweet trumpet, Blackie had played hot. That had been a long time ago. Later, when Blackie had his own band, he'd taken Jake with him.

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"You're looking good, Jake," Blackie said, "Knocking 'em dead, kid?" That wasn't what he'd meant to say. It wasn't what he'd rehearsed. It just came out.

"Hello," Jake said. He was a lanky guy with thinning curly hair and a wistful smile. His tired eyes popped as he recognized Blackie. His jaw sagged. "Blackie, you old son! Hell, boy, I'm glad to see you. When did you get out—" He broke off. Crimson mottled his thin features. He saw Blackie's hand stuck out, took it limply.

"That's all right, Jake," Blackie cut in. "I just got back. I came right here." He flicked a finger against his mouth. "The lip's still good, Jake. I've still got a horn that'll blast Gabriel right off his perch. I'm out for a job. Anything around I could try for?"

Jake Watson shuffled his feet. "I don't know, Blackie." He looked down, kicked at a squashed butt on the pavement. "Things aren't good. Things are—Say, wait a minute. Harry Courtney was around trying to pick up a band for a club date. Maybe he'd—I mean if you're interested. . . ."

"Thanks, Jake." A light came into Blackie's jet eyes. "I'll talk to Harry."

While talking with Jake, Blackie had been watching the others—all men he knew and had worked with—nudging, stopping their talk, craning their necks. Now there was an embarrassed silence between him and Jake.

"Say, I—uh—got to run, Blackie," Jake blurted suddenly. His eyes wouldn't stay still. "Got to see somebody."

He wheeled away. A rosy-faced kid approached Blackie then. He had wavy blond hair and wide shining eyes, bluer than tropical seas.

"Excuse me, Mr. Blair," he said. His voice trembled a little. "You don't remember me, I guess. I was only fourteen, then. You played a one-night stand at the country club in my home town, Little Falls. You let me play my trumpet for you. You told me I was good. You said to hold tight

and some day I'd be on top. You don't know what that meant to me, Mr. Blair . . . Well, I came to New York and—and I've got a band of my own now." He paused, and the blue eyes looked solemnly at Blackie. "I wanted you to know that what you did that night helped a lot."

"That's fine, kid. That's fine." Blackie turned his eyes away, looked up the street. He spotted Harry Courtney breaking away from a group. Blackie wanted to grab him before somebody else did. He walked away from the kid, toward Courtney, thinking:

This should be easy. Harry Courtney was always a funny duck, but he's all right. He used to get sore when we kidded him about his claustrophobia, but he's okay. He won't turn me down. I'm glad it's Harry.

JUST as Courtney was entering the Union Hall, Blackie touched his arm. "Hi, Harry," he said. "This is your lucky day. You got your trumpet for that club job."

Plump and loud in a bright blue gabardine suit, Courtney wobbled the cigar stuck between his lips. He had a musician's palor, more deadly than most. His gray eyes were chipped out of slate.

"Hello, Blair," he said. Nothing changed in his expression; nothing lighted his eyes. It could have been six hours since he'd seen Blackie instead of six years. "Who? Who's the trumpet?"

The cords in Blackie's neck got tight. Courtney knew what he had meant, all right.

"Listen, Harry," Blackie said. "I played in the band—up there. I still ride a hot horn."

Courtney slamped down on his cigar. He took Blackie's hand from his arm. "Sorry," he said.

"Harry!" Blackie whirled him around. He started to tremble, and the hot wetness of anger burned his bright black eyes. "I want a chance, Harry. That's all. A chance!"

"I said I was sorry, Blair." Courtney

blinked, expressionless. "Like to, Blair, but I couldn't bring you out to that party. It's a ritzy job out on the Island. Somebody'd recognize you and—I just can't, Blair."

"Look," Blackie tried to hold onto himself. He'd known it might be something like this, but now that he was facing it, he found he could hardly take it. "Am I *that* kind of poison? What happened before, Harry—well, nothing like that'll ever happen again. Up there—up where I've been—they teach you to control your temper. I'm not like I used to be. I'm easy-going now, Harry. I—"

"Yeah, so I see," Courtney looked down at Blackie's white-skinned fists and up at his anger-inflamed face. Courtney's mouth twisted at one corner. "So long, Blackie."

Tears of rage misted thickly in Blackie's eyes. He knew that was the danger sign, that he should shy off before it was too late, before he got into trouble. But he couldn't. Words spilled out of him like acid bubbling from a vat.

"Ten years ago when you were a green kid, I stuck you in my band and nursed you along, Courtney. I made you the best trombonist in the country, taught you everything you know. I even trained you how to run the band when I couldn't be around."

Blackie's fist grabbed the front of Courtney's loud suit. The sinews in his wrist stood out like steel thews. He pulled Courtney's plump figure up onto tiptoes.

"You hear me, Harry," he said softly, "I did all that for you. Then when—when—that thing happened to me, you took the outfit over altogether. That was all right too. I didn't blame you. But now when I come back and ask you for one stinking night's work, Harry, don't go and snow all over me like that. Hear me, Harry. I don't like that. It makes me crazy!"

Blackie held Courtney, pale and squealing and squirming futilely, tightly with one fist while he drew back the other. The mad wetness in Blackie's eyes glistened crazily in the sun. His voice pitched up. "I don't

like that, Harry. I won't take it from you!"

He started to swing, but a hand caught his arm. A voice said sharply, "No! Cut that out, Mr. Blair. The hell with him. I've got a job for you."

Something in the voice, in the words, cut through Blackie's temper. He loosened all over. His fist released the front of Courtney's suit.

It was the blond boy who held his arm, the good-looking lad from Little Falls. The kid said quietly, "Come on, Mr. Blair, let's go where we can get some java."

HE TOOK Blackie's arm, started across the street toward a cafeteria. "That was great. You were swell, Blackie—I mean, Mr. Blair. It's about time somebody dusted Courtney off."

"Yeah," Blackie said. He brushed tears from his eyes. The fever of anger cooled and left him chilled. "Yeah, that was the nuts. A sweet little exhibition. The first day back, and I blow my top in front of everybody!"

"Forget it," the kid said. "You've got a job if you want one. You're going to work with me."

"With you?" Blackie said.

They were almost across the street when Blackie turned to look at the lad and saw the car. It came hurtling across Sixth Avenue, wide open. A cop's whistle screamed. The car's motor roared like a tank's. It swerved over to the wrong side, straight at Blackie and the blond youngster.

"Look out!" Blackie yelled. He grabbed the kid's arm. He could see the big chrome slotted front and the headlights like great evil eyes, right on top of them, almost. It was a heavy car, a Buick. He saw a blur of features—then he went through the air in a makeshift swan dive and landed on his face.

The kid jumped too. But, caught in a panic, his reflexes failed him. He leaped the wrong way, backward. The front bumper smashed him right at the knees, flipped

him cork-screwing the air across to the other side of the street. He came down wrapped around a fire plug.

The car's tires screeched as it careened back to the right and sped on. There was nothing, nobody to stop it.

Blackie got up, stared after the speeding car. He looked across the street. The kid's broken figure, twisted crookedly around the bottom of the fire plug, didn't move. There was a horrible silence for an instant, then screams and shouts and curses shattered it like pebbles breaking the surface of a quiet pond.

By the time Blackie crossed over, there was a crowd around the fire plug. Blackie pushed through to where he could see the kid's face. Blood trickled from the soft blond features. Even if the lad was still alive, it wouldn't be for long.

Blackie remembered the kid's friendliness. He couldn't recall that time the boy had mentioned, but he could just see him there at the small town country club. He could see the kid timidly speaking up to him, the look on his face when he got a chance to play for Blackie and his boys. That was when the name Blackie Blair meant the best music in the nation.

So the kid had grown up and come to New York. He'd cooked up a little outfit of his own and seeing his old idol down and beaten, the kid had even offered him a job. . . . Now he was lying there, twisted, broken. A lump burned and choked in Blackie's throat.

HE STRAIGHTENED up, turned to Jake Watson in the front of the crowd. "Who is he, Jake, do you know?"

"Who?" Jake looked amazed. "Who is he? Why, Blackie, that's Bobby Rey, the kid wonder, the biggest sensation in the business."

Blackie's lips soundlessly formed the name: "Bobby Rey!" A month ago, up there, up the river, he'd received a fairly recent copy of a trade paper. He'd read

about Bobby Rey. Only twenty-one, and already on top of the heap. Currently he was working the Stratosphere Roof.

And here, when nobody else would approach Blackie Blair with a ten-foot pole, that kid had remembered a good word and a pat on the back. He had risked ridicule, even a reputation, perhaps, to give Blackie a job.

Pushing back out through the crowds Blackie heard the scream of an approaching ambulance. He passed a cop talking to a cabbie. The cop was saying, "We found the car abandoned over in Times Square. Nobody saw who got out of it. It was one of those Drive-It-Yourself jobs."

Hearing that brought it all back to Blackie. He remembered the things that had happened since he got off the train from Ossining that morning. On a subway platform a man had jostled against him as an express was roaring in. It was the merest freak of luck that he had been able to avoid being tumbled off the platform under the train's heavy wheels. Afterward there had been no sign of the man who had done the jostling. Blackie quite naturally, had dismissed it as an accident.

An hour later as he passed a building being wrecked, a paving brick skinned down past his nose, crashed to the pavement at his feet. A quarter of an inch between him and death on that one.

Several times that morning as he tramped around Times Square drinking in all the familiar sights, he had seemed to sense that someone was following him. He'd laughed and called it imagination.

That was because he had just about forgotten *The Maestro* in those six years up there. And there was no reason *The Maestro* should bother him now when he was down and out and broke.

But now he remembered, and now he knew. Only one person used Drive-It-Yourself cars for murder machines. Eight years ago a piano player in Blackie's band had died that same way.

The Maestro was after him again.

Blackie stopped right there in the middle of the street and covered his lean dark face with his hands. People stepped warily around him, staring, startled.

He said into his hands, "That kid wasn't meant to die. It was me who was supposed to get it. Bobby Rey was only trying to help me. He was being a right guy. He was doing something big and swell—and he died for it. He had the world at his feet, just getting all that he had dreamed of and worked for. And now he's dead. Only because the poor kid wanted to do something for me!"

His hands fell limply to his sides. He walked on. He turned up Broadway to Fifty-Seventh, and over toward his rooming house near Ninth Avenue. While he walked his mind worked back over the whole thing.

CHAPTER TWO

The Maestro

IT BEGAN way back, when Blackie was twenty-seven and his hit recordings were selling faster than they could be pressed.

Blackie was in the rehearsal hall on Forty-Fourth when the phone call came. A voice, muffled and queer said, "Blackie Blair? . . . Starting this Friday you are going to pay me two hundred and fifty dollars a week."

"Sure," Blackie said. "Very funny. Stop horsing around, will you. I'm rehearsing. I—"

"I'm not fooling." There was something in the voice that proved that. "You'll do as I say, or things are going to start happening to your hand."

"Say, who is this?" Blackie demanded.

"You will put the two-fifty in an old paper sack, and at exactly three o'clock, Friday afternoon, you'll toss it into the trash basket at the corner of Forty-Sixth and Broadway."

"Sure. Sure, and I'll tie a pink ribbon around it, too."

"If you don't do as instructed, I advise that you start looking for a new fiddle player. Jerry Fee will be leaving you. Suddenly!"

"Say, listen, I don't go for this shake-down stuff," Blackie said. His eyes started to water with temper. "Get the hell off this wire and stay off! Don't bother me again or I'll toss you in a trash can. In pieces!"

"All right, Blackie," the muffled voice said softly. "All right. I can't start arguing with you fellows. You've heard what I have to say."

Blackie fumed for a while, then he forgot that phone call a day or so later. Protection rackets, extortion of any kind, was nothing new then. Every punk who saw a gangster movie went into the business. But they always picked on the little guys, little shop owners, small fry. Blackie was big stuff, Broadway. They wouldn't dare bother him!

So there was no paper bag filled with bills in a Times Square ashcan on Friday.

The next week, Jerry Fee, Blackie's violinist, stepped through an elevator door on the tenth floor of the hotel where he was staying. There was no elevator there. It was such a perfect "accident" Blackie didn't even associate it with the shakedown phone call right away.

The muffled voice called again in a few days. "This is *The Maestro* again. Too bad about Jerry, Blackie. . . . Shall we make it this coming Friday?"

Blackie didn't answer for several seconds, then he said, "Don't guff me, will you? Just because poor Jerry had a tough break, don't try to take advantage of it. *Nobody* could work a kill that smoothly."

"No?" said the voice. "You'd better carry out my previous instructions this Friday. Les Formez, your piano player, is a valuable man. A word to the wise, Blackie."

Still Blackie didn't fall. He was no sucker.

A hit-and-run driver got Formez. A big balloon-bodied car did the job. They found it abandoned a few blocks away. It had been rented from a Drive-It-Yourself place. The papers of the man who had hired it were phony.

There was no tracing him.

The boys in Blackie's band began to say queer things after that. They hinted maybe Blackie's outfit was jinxed. Musicians are like that. And it did look a bit strange, two men from the same outfit having fatal accidents one right after the other. Blackie had to do a lot of fast talking to keep the outfit together.

When he heard from *The Maestro* again, all he said was, "Okay, you win. My band's falling apart. You've got to cut it out. What do you want me to do?"

The instructions were the same. That next Friday an old bleary-eyed bum shuffled up to a garbage can at Forty-Sixth and Broadway. He picked up a bulging paper bag from the rubbish and ambled away. He didn't get far. Two husky lads from the Broadway Squad grabbed him.

But that didn't help. The ancient mendicant knew nothing. A man gave him a dollar to go get the package. He had not been able to get a good look at the man. The man had talked to him in a shadowy alley. And when the police visited the alley where the hobo had been ordered to bring the package, they found no one.

TWO more incidents occurred the next day. Blackie's drummer cut a main artery in his throat, while shaving with a straight razor, and bled to death.

It was a freak thing, everybody said. They couldn't understand how it happened. But there was no question about it. The corpse was found in the bathroom, stripped to the waist, leather on its face.

The second thing was a note to Blackie. It read: "*This time we'll make it the ashcan at Thirty-Eighth and Seventh Avenue. And I wouldn't speak to the police again. You*

wouldn't want the blood of any more musicians on your hands, would you?"

The note was signed *The Maestro*, and there was a crudely drawn musical note struck rakishly through the signature.

There was no fighting something like that. No one could be guarded against "accidents" of that sort. Blackie had to pay.

From time to time he heard of unfortunate "accidental" deaths striking other musicians in other bands. *The Maestro* was spreading out. After awhile it got so that every bandleader in the business had that same tight, haunted look on his face. But several times, when Blackie brought up the subject among his fellow leaders, they all clammed up as though they'd eaten alum. They would change the subject, and walk out of the room on him. One even swung at him and told him to mind his own business.

Probably, like Blackie, most of them felt sure *The Maestro* was some one in the profession. He seemed to know what men were vital to different units, what the approximate income of each leader was, and how much he could be bled for. So they didn't want to talk about it. They didn't like the possibility that the very man they were talking with might be the extortionist.

So it went on. Everything was engineered perfectly. In several instances where bandleaders, driven too far, sought police help, or tried to catch *The Maestro* personally, those same men met with "accidents."

One after another Blackie saw the strain take its toll. Maybe you remember some of the names. Buddy Ralston committed suicide. Frank Santoro, the Rhumba King, drank himself to death. But always there were new names, new victims cropping up.

Two years of it made Blackie an emaciated wreck. He was drunk half the time. He almost lost all control of a temper that was never any too tame. He fought with his friends. For petty offenses, he fired good musicians who had been with him a long time.

Worst of all, sometime during that period, something went out of Blackie's music. He had always been the top trumpet player in the land. But good music—that something that sets one man's playing above the rest—comes from inside a man, not from inside his instrument. And Blackie's insides were shriveling, festering in torment. He kept thinking about the boys who had died in the beginning because of his stubbornness. He got so bad he had to stop featuring his trumpet.

When he couldn't sleep nights he'd get up and pore over his old bank books and his new ones, numbing over the withdrawals. First two-fifty, then three hundred, four hundred, five-fifty. Because, in spite of everything, Blackie's band swept up in popularity. He had the best arrangers and good contacts and a reputation.

Yes, Blackie had fame, and he made a lot of money. But none of that was any good. Everyone in the business grew to hate him, but not as much as he hated himself. He finally decided there was only one salvation. Somehow, he, personally, had to get *The Maestro*.

HE ALMOST did. The day the extortionist called to raise the ante to seven hundred and fifty a week, Blackie set the trap. He must have worked it smoothly, too, for *The Maestro* fell for it. Or maybe by this time the guy had grown too confident and a little careless.

Blackie told him that he would have to meet him, talk to him personally about something very important. The blackmailer balked, but Blackie told him, "Unless I get to talk to you about this, you'll never get another cent from me. You can kill off every guy in the band and me too, but it won't do any good. And we can't discuss it over the phone."

The Maestro argued, threatened, but Blackie stuck to his guns. Finally he won. Blackie was warned, though, that there had better not be any tricks or traps.

"Of course not," Blackie assured him. "I like living too much."

Early that evening Blackie entered an empty rear flat on the third floor of a tenement walkup, as instructed. It was pitch black inside. He flicked a light switch, but nothing happened. Either there were no bulbs or the current was cut.

From across the room a familiar muffled voice said, "Shut the door and raise your hands."

Blackie obeyed. A bright flashlight beam speared through the dusty darkness of the empty room full into his face.

"What's the trouble?" the voice said. There was a nervous edge to the tone. "Hurry up. Spit it out."

Blackie drew a painful breath, started through the pencil of light toward that voice. "You've got competition," he said. "I received a letter today. There's another *Maestro* working the same racket."

"What?" The flash beam jerked. The muffled voice rose. "You're crazy! Let me see that letter."

"I've got it in my pocket," Blackie said. "You can take it out."

And then he took his chance. He'd thought it all out. It was a fair gamble. If he lost, it would all be over and it would probably be just as well. He was about licked anyhow. He had nothing to live for anymore. If he won, there would be no more *Maestro*. The world would be a better place to live in. Maybe he'd even get back that indefinable something which had disappeared from his music. Some of his boys who had died would be avenged.

He flung himself through that probing glare of light, a savage snarl bursting through his clenched teeth. A gun whammed almost in his ear, and hot lead singed one cheek. But his hands caught around a pair of legs and he flung *The Maestro* to the floor.

They rolled around, cursing, breathing hard, kicking and clawing and hammering at each other with their fists. Suddenly *The*

Maestro broke loose from Blackie's grip. He scrambled to his feet. Blackie lunged after him, and missed. He heard feet pounding across the floor and leaped away in pursuit.

The Maestro flung open a door of a closet by mistake. But his momentum carried him on in, and before he could recover, Blackie piled in after him. The door slammed shut behind them. Blackie leaned against it, with his hands behind him, found a key. He turned it, locking the door, then pulled the key out and dropped it in his pocket.

He crouched low and to one side of the door. Against a narrow window at the far side of the closet, he watched the silhouetted figure of the other man.

"I've locked the door," Blackie said. "It's three stories to the ground. There's just the two of us here. Only one of us is going to leave this closet alive."

Flattened against one wall, he edged slowly along. He knew what *The Maestro* would do. He would empty his gun toward the door and then make a break for it, try to break it down. That was when Blackie was going to grab him. He had the advantage, now. He could see the other man outlined against the window, but *The Maestro* couldn't see him.

"Locked in!" the muffled voice screamed. "You've shut us in this little shoebox of a closet? You fool, you fool!" *The Maestro* then did something Blackie had not expected. He didn't rush toward the door. He didn't fire a single shot. He stood frozen for several moments, making little mumbling sounds, then he leaped headlong through the window in a shower of broken glass.

BLACKIE stared numbly at the shattered window. He stood there for quite a while. When he finally ran and looked out, the broken body of *The Maestro* wasn't lying in the yard three floors below. The man was climbing a fence, dropping to the other side and racing away down an alley.

The move had been so sudden, so suicidal, Blackie couldn't have prevented it if he had tried. *The Maestro* had gambled possible death against a clean getaway. It had been a hundred-to-one shot, but he had won.

Having *The Maestro* right in his hands and letting him escape broke Blackie completely. He didn't get another chance, either.

Nor did the killer have an opportunity to get revenge for Blackie's double-cross trap.

Later that same night Blackie led his band, so drunk he could hardly stand. Some of the boys had tried to stop him, send him home. But they couldn't do anything with him. They had to let him go ahead and make a fool of himself. It made them more than a little sick.

He surprised them though by keeping fair control. He wasn't too bad, and everything might have gone off all right in spite of his condition. Only there was that drunk there, dancing.

He was the playful type of inebriate. He kept waltzing back and forth in front of the dais, making cute remarks. Some drunks are like that.

"Boy," he'd say, "you're really sendin' it solid, tonight, maestro. Hotcha!" To his girl, he'd add, "Listen, baby, listen to 'em beat it out. Play, maestro, play!"

It was the "maestro" business that got Blackie. That was all he needed. He took it for awhile, seething, then he boiled over. After the drunk had kiddingly referred to him that way a dozen times, Blackie leaped down off his stand. Anger was hot within him.

"Don't call me that! he cried. "Don't call me that!"

He hit the man. He hit him hard. The drunk staggered backward from the blow and fell. His head cracked an iron pole, and his skull fractured. He recovered, but the papers made quite a smell about it. They said Blackie was a "drunken bum who'd got too big for his britches." They sent him away for a good jolt. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Sister

WHEN Blackie entered his rooming house he found a note pushed under his door. He went into his room, flopped on the cheap bed, and opened the letter. He took a railroad ticket to Chicago out of the envelope. The little slip of paper with it read:

You won't always be so lucky.

There was the old familiar signature with the music note penciled.

He got up from the bed and went over and stuck the ticket into the dresser mirror. He leaned toward his reflection. He was a big fellow in a slim, stooped sort of way. His hair was short and straight and very black. His eyes were black, too, deeply set and fierce under raven brows. His chin was blunt and square.

Studying him, you would have said: "Here is a man at the borderline. He is like a steel blade that has been bent too far, and a little more pressure will either break it completely or it will suddenly snap back real hard, just the way it was. But right now, you can't tell which it will be. You can't tell."

Blackie reached up and took the ticket down again. He started to tear it between his slim, fingers. But he didn't.

"Maybe the *Maestro* is right," he murmured. "What's the sense of it? What does New York hold for me, anyhow?"

He put the ticket back. He got his battered suitcase from the closet, tossed in clean shirts, comb and toothbrush and paste from a drawer. Then he went downstairs to the hall phone and called Grand Central. There wouldn't be another train to Chicago for four hours, he learned.

Back in his room he unpacked the trumpet. He wiped its gleaming surface gently, caressingly, with a soft rag. He turned on the cheap little bureau radio, tuned into a recorded dance program.

He blew a few preliminary notes, then rode in with the music. He played it hot and hard. It blended right in with the recorded band, and it would have sounded good to ordinary people. But when the number was finished, Blackie took the instrument from his mouth and fingered his lip.

He looked down at the trumpet, one finger still on a valve.

"It's gone," he said softly. "There's no use kidding myself. I guess it's gone forever. It wasn't so noticeable, playing with the prison band, blowing that corn, but now. . . ."

Another song blared from the set. Blackie set the trumpet on the bed, stood up, walked to the window. He stared out into the alley for some minutes. The voice from the hall downstairs yelled, "Telephone for Blair! Blair! Telephone!" several times before Blackie heard it. Finally he wheeled from the window and went downstairs.

He put the receiver to his ear. "Hello," he said.

"Blackie!" The muffled voice hadn't changed at all. "That train for Chi leaves at seven-sixteen, Blackie."

"Suppose I don't take that train?" he asked.

"You'll take it, Blackie. You'll take it. You were always smart . . . except that one time."

Blackie pulled his lower lip between his teeth and didn't answer for a few seconds. Then he said, "It isn't revenge. It isn't just that you want, because I tricked you that night. If it was that, you wouldn't be satisfied with just having me leave town. . . . Or is that part of some elaborate plan? Why don't you leave me alone? Why don't you stop it?"

"You know why, Blackie."

That was all. The line clicked dead. Blackie replaced the receiver, climbed wearily back to his room. He had left the radio playing and when he entered he stopped just inside, listening.

THE SONG coming from the radio was an old-timer. The trumpet was up front, soloing. It was a hot trumpet, and the guy who was playing really had the slit of it. There was a certain tonal quality, a haunting sadness in the heat of it that prickled Blackie's marrow.

He stood entranced. Over and over he whispered, "If I could only do that again!"

The number finished. The announcer came on. "Sometimes, songs mellow with age just like wine. That little thing you just heard, an old recording played by Blackie Blair and his band, is one of those songs."

The announcer had more to say, but Blackie stopped listening. He shut the door, picked up his trumpet. He said, "It can't be gone. I can get it back. I will."

When the music started once more he rode in again. For two hours straight he did that. When the knock of the door suddenly broke in and Blackie got up to answer it, he was drenched with sweat.

A girl stood there. She was taller than average, slim in her simply-tailored suit. She held a neat red leather purse in front of her. Her fingers pressed into it so tightly that the fingertips were very white around the carmined nails.

She had made up carefully, but still you could tell she had been crying hard not too long ago. It showed in the faint red marks around her tiny nose, in the deepened shadows of her gray-green eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her voice made her perfect. It was low and throaty and a little sad. "I'm Sandra Rey. I sing with Bobby Rey's band. I—I'm his sister."

"Oh," Blackie said. He opened the door wide. "Please come in."

He was suddenly ashamed of the shabby smallness of the room. She stood in its center, gripping the little red bag tightly. The yellow bulb in the ceiling made dancing highlights in the soft-piled chestnut waves of her hair.

Blackie motioned to the only chair. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then

stepped across the room and sat down. Blackie perched on the edge of the bed.

"Bobby's dead," Sandra said. Her lips flattened against her teeth; her brow knit as she strained to keep from weeping. "He died an hour after they brought him to the hospital. The police told me that you were with him when that—when he—when it happened. They—the police think that it was not an accident."

"What do they think it was?"

"They don't know. Bystanders swear that car *tried* to hit one, or both of you. Which one was it, Mr. Blair? It was Bobby, wasn't it? I know it was."

"Why?" he looked at her closely. "Why do you think that?"

She leaned forward from the waist. "Because Bobby has been—well, he's had some trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Yes," she said quickly. She got very pale and the ridge of her firm little jaw hardened into a white line. "Someone has been bleeding Bobby. Someone called *The Maestro*."

Blackie picked up his trumpet, packed it back into its case. Then he said, "Do you know if Bobby tried to buck this guy? Did he fight him?"

She stood up too. Her gray-green eyes went wild. "I don't know. I don't think so, but I don't know." She shook her head crazily. "I'm going to the police and tell them all about that. I wanted to go before, but Bobby wouldn't let me. I'm going now. They'll be able to figure things out."

HE TOOK hold of her arm as she started for the door. "Why did you come to me about it?"

"I thought maybe you might know something. You were with him. I thought—I don't know. . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Then Blackie told her how he had met Bobby and what had happened. When he had finished, she lowered her eyes.

"That's just like Bobby," she told him. "He's always admired you. You were like a god to him. Back in Little Falls he used to play your records over and over by the hour. Even when you—got into that trouble. Bobby was loyal."

Again she started for the door, but his grip held her arm.

"Sandra," he said. "You can't go to the police. You don't know what would happen to you if you did that. You can't!"

And then he told her his whole story. He told her all he knew about *The Maestro*. At the end, tears were brimming forth from her eyes.

She said, "That's it, all right. The same thing nearly all the way through with Bobby. He lost his bass fiddle man and the boy who played clarinet. Only he never told me the truth about them. . . . Can't something be done, Blackie? It's horrible. Something like that can't go on."

"Yes," he said. He looked down into those moistly lovely eyes as he spoke. Sandra's lips were slightly parted; the smooth white edges of her teeth showed. Under Blackie's fingers, the flesh of her arms was soft and cool. A sweet, clean scent came from her hair.

"I'm in the spot to do it now, kid, because nobody'll get hurt but me. For some reason, *The Maestro's* afraid of me. Maybe he thinks I was a little too clever in almost catching him last time, and that I might make another stab. That must be the reason he's come after me now. And that helps. It gives me a little advantage. . . . I won't niff it this time, either."

"No, Blackie," she said. Her glance seemed to caress his whole face. You can't fight him alone. You've been hurt enough already. You—"

"Don't worry about me," he broke in gently. "Sandra . . . a long time ago, I knew lots of women. You know how the business is. Please don't think this is a line. At a time like this, I wouldn't try anything like that, even if it were possible with you. . . .

What I'm going to say is that when you came into this room, Sandra, something happened that I always used to laugh about."

She didn't answer. She didn't have to. But when he kissed her lips, her hands came up to the back of his neck. Her fingers dug into his neck.

They broke apart with an almost guilty start as someone rapped sharply on the door. Blackie strode toward the sound, flung the door open.

Harry Courtney's plump face was red and his thick lips were curled around the cigar in a self-conscious grin. His blue gabardine suit had been replaced by an equally sickening green one.

He said, "Sorry to disturb you, Blair." Flinty eyes cut past Blackie to Sandra. "I stopped up to apologize for the way I acted this afternoon."

"Yeah?" Blackie said.

"Yeah. I—well, I've been thinking it over, and if there's no hard feelings I'd like to have you on that job, tonight."

Blackie said, "Oh!" He turned to look at Sandra, and past her to the railroad ticket stuck in the side of the mirror. "That's nice of you, Harry, but I don't think I can make it. I'm going to be busy."

COURTNEY shuffled backward from the door, chewing his cigar. "Okay, then, Blair. I just wanted you to know I didn't really mean anything. You know. If I can do anything for you, I will." His face lighted with a sudden thought. "Say, I just remembered I might have something big for you in a few days. You'd be just the man. Don't go away or anything, without letting me know your new address."

"Right, Harry," Blackie said. "Thanks. I expect to be around. If you want me, you'll find me here."

He shut the door, turned back to Sandra. She was repairing the damage to her lip rouge.

"I'm glad he came," he said. "It re-

minded me of something else I wanted to talk about, Blackie." She took a deep breath. "I—I talked with Bobby a few minutes before he died. He made me promise to get you to take his place in the band. You see, I'll take over the handling of the thing. It'll really be my band, but I'd like you to lead it, Blackie. With your name, the way you play—"

"Yeah, my name," he interrupted. "The way I play!" He laughed bitterly. "Did you hear me before?"

"Yes," she said. "I was outside listening for a while before I knocked. But you—you were only kicking it around then. You weren't really giving. I've heard your recordings, Blackie."

He shook his head. He looked down at the floor, kicked at a splinter. "I *was* giving. I was really trying like hell. But I can't play anymore, Sandy. Something's gone, something's missing." His eyes went bleak. "I can still play. I can get by. But I'm not *good* any more."

"You'll get over it," she told him. "You've got to do this. Bobby wanted it. You don't even have to play if you don't want. Just wave a stick and fake a few numbers until you get hold of yourself again."

He still shook his head. "No, Sandra. Until I can really ride a horn again, I don't belong to a top outfit. I thought at first, right up until this afternoon, that I wanted to stick my nose in somewhere, anyhow, and try and coast through on my rep."

Pausing, he looked at her. He could see them together on a bandstand. He'd be back on top again, laughing down at those guys who had looked at him so pityingly in front of the Union Hall this afternoon. But there was an ugly shadow over that whole picture.

He went on, "I'm going to hook up with some little outfit where I won't be over my head. I'll stick in the jive joints until I get back that thing that's gone. Even if it's forever."

There was a little smiling light of understanding in her lovely gray-green eyes. "All right, Blackie." Her voice was soft. "If you want it like that. I—I think I understand. You see, the same thing was beginning to happen to Bobby. Something was beginning to fade out of his music, too. He knew it, and he was afraid of it. That's one reason why, when he heard that you were getting out, coming back, he wanted to get you in the band. He thought maybe you could help him."

She started toward the door and now she wasn't looking at him. One last time he stopped her. He tilted her chin. "No cops," he said. "Promise? Leave *The Maestro* to me."

"I can't, Blackie." She didn't look up. "I can't promise that. It isn't fair for you, all alone, to—"

"It's fair," he stopped her. "He killed me, too, in a different way. And it was because of me, really, that Bobby. . . . Don't you see that it's my job? It's just got to be me."

Her gaze was drawn up to his, then. She saw something in the hard, black depths of his eyes. Suddenly her long, curling lashes got wet again. "All right, I promise," she said. "But be careful, Blackie. Please."

He kissed her, but gently this time and let her hand trail slowly out of his. When the door slammed shut behind her, he went over to the mirror and snatched the railroad ticket. He stuck it in his pocket.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killer's Corner

AFTER Blackie turned in the ticket for badly needed cash at Grand Central, a wry smile twisted his lips. It was nice of *The Maestro* to finance him that way. He spent some of the money for dinner at a cafeteria, then stopped into a bar for a drink.

In the bar mirror he watched the reflec-

tion of a small dark man, who was carefully nursing a beer. The man's eyes never looked up from the drink. In the cafeteria where Blackie had eaten, the same man had not looked up from his dinner, either. When Blackie got up to leave, so did he.

He was not a man you would pick out of a crowd. He wore a nondescript dark suit and a brown hat. From what Blackie could see, this fellow looked like a nice little guy. But Blackie didn't think he was.

Draining his glass, Blackie turned casually away from the bar, headed for the street door. Just before he reached it, he pivoted abruptly, snapping his fingers as though in sudden remembrance of something important. The little dark man had already set his half finished beer down, and had started after Blackie. Now he almost broke his neck swinging back to his original position.

Straight through to the men's room in the rear Blackie went. Inside, he lit a cigarette and perched on the window sill. When he had finished the smoke he stationed himself to the right of the door, so that when it opened in, he would be hidden from the person entering.

He waited like that for about five minutes. He was just about to leave, figuring that maybe he had made a wrong guess, when the dark little fellow came in.

Blackie grabbed the back of his jacket at the neck, stripped it half way down off the shoulders. The little man's arms were pinned behind him as perfectly as though he were in a straight jacket. Blackie's free hand yanked a gun out of the gunman's side pocket. It was a little black automatic.

"Just your size." Blackie back-handed the little guy away from him. He held the gun lightly in his hand. "He had you stationed at Grand Central, didn't he? What did he tell you to do if I didn't take the train?"

The gungel hunched the jacket back up onto his shoulders. There was no expression at all on his thin, dark face. His eyes were a pale, blurred blue, fixed in an unblinking stare.

"Answer me!" Blackie ordered. "Were you just supposed to follow me and let him know where I went?" He jiggled the gun. "Or did you have orders to use this when you got me in a nice private spot?"

The frosted blue stare didn't waver.

"Hiring cheap little kill-punks like you!" Blackie said. He stepped forward, feinted with his gun hand—and the little thug ducked right into a deadly left hook. He spun once, staggered into a booth, and fell to the floor.

Blackie dropped the automatic into his pocket and went out of the tavern. He walked down Forty-Second to Fifth and entered the big library. In the periodical room he got the back number files of several music trade journals and spent an hour and a half carefully poring over them.

FIRST he checked the dates of the death notices of all the musicians he could remember who had suffered "accidental" deaths at the hands of *The Maestro*. Then he looked up what bands were playing New York on every one of those dates. This way he eliminated a good many leaders as possible suspects. When he left the library, he had a list of six names. If *The Maestro* was a big name band leader, as Blackie suspected, he was one of those six. It was a long chance, but about the only angle he had to work out.

He couldn't pull his plan tonight because all of the six leaders would be at work. But tomorrow morning Blackie intended to call them, pretending that he was *The Maestro*, and order them to appear at a certain corner at a certain time. The one who didn't show up would be the extortionist.

Out on the street, Blackie glanced at a newsstand's stack of late evening newspapers. He stopped short and looked again at a picture on the front page. He had never seen Sandra Rey smiling happily, the way she was in that picture, but he recognized her right away.

Under the photo a caption read:

SINGER SERIOUSLY INJURED

Blackie bought a paper, fumbled it open to the story on the second page.

Sandra Rey, glamorous singing star of the Ritz-Barbizon's Stratosphere Roof, was taken to the Mercy Hospital early this evening in a critical condition as a result of an accident. Miss Rey, sister of the late Bobby Rey, orchestra leader, who was himself killed only yesterday by a mysterious hit-and-run driver, was waiting for a cab at the corner of Park Avenue and 61st St., when a section of plate glass window, being installed in a penthouse fifteen floors above, fell off a ledge. The heavy slab of glass crashed to the pavement a few feet from Miss Rey who was seriously cut by the flying shards. Judging by the location of the glass when it left the roof, it was a miracle that the whole thing did not fall right on Miss Rey's head.

Blackie did not read any more. He let the paper slip from his numbed fingers, and go whipping up the street with the wind. He hailed a cab.

"Mercy Hospital," he said. "Please get there fast, pal. Please!"

THE doctor said, "No." He was a tall, tired looking man in white. He had iron gray hair and silver-rimmed spectacles. He was polite but firm. "You're not even a relative, Mr. Blair. Perhaps tomorrow, if her condition improves."

"But I've told you," Blackie cut in. He held out his hands, pleadingly. "I won't even speak. I won't breathe. I just want to look at her."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blair."

Blackie's fists balled at his sides, and his mouth pulled into a thin seam. Very slowly he turned away and walked down the hospital corridor toward the elevators.

He was just pushing the down button when the doctor called, "Mr. Blair!"

"Yes, sir!" Blackie whirled back.

A nurse was with the doctor now. They were both smiling a little. The doc said, "Is your name Blackie, Mr. Blair? Are you Blackie Blair?"

"Yes," he said, his voice breaking.

"Miss Rey has regained consciousness. She keeps calling for you. If you will assure me that you will not excite her too much, and will leave the instant we say—"

"Sure," Blackie said. "Sure, Doc. Anything at all."

And then he was beside the bed there in that dimly-lit room. But the still figure under the crisply starched sheets was not Sandra Rey; at least not the girl he had held in his arms this very afternoon. This was a mummy, swathed in miles of gauze. There were narrow gaps in the bandages across the eyes and the mouth, and Blackie could see the long thick lashes and the full lips, very pale, now.

Softly, not even loud as a whisper, he breathed her name: "Sandy! Oh, Sandy!"

"Shhh!" The nurse cautioned, then tugged at his sleeve. "You'd better go now."

He didn't move. He kept his gaze on those two slits in the head bandages.

The eyes moved first, just a little, the lashes flickering. Then the lips parted and Sandra said weakly, "Blackie! Blackie, I—I don't want to die!"

His fingernails bit holes in his palms. He smiled stiffly and found suddenly that he couldn't see through a fog of tears.

"Don't talk so silly, Sandy," he said huskily. "You're going to live. I'm going to be waiting for you."

"All right, Blackie, if you say so." A silvery tear squeezed through her lashes, rolled across the gauze. "You'll have to take over the band, Blackie. They have no one, now. You hear me?"

"Come, Mr. Blair," the nurse said. "You must go."

He followed the nurse and the doctor out into the hall. He went down on the elevator and left the hospital. But he didn't know he had done any of that until he suddenly found himself at Times Square.

After that he walked around the dark streets. He kept thinking about all the men *The Maestro* had killed. He kept seeing Sandra, lying on a sidewalk in a clutter of

broken glass. He knew what had happened. *The Maestro* had been afraid that Sandra, after her brother's death, would go to the police. So he had arranged another "accident."

Blackie's fingers kept closing around the gun he had taken from the dark little killer. He wished there was some way he could get *The Maestro* quickly, without going through a flock of elaborate plans.

Just before dawn, he flopped, exhausted, on a bench in Central Park. The hot morning sun, blazing down into his eyes, awoke him. He saw that it was already eleven o'clock when he hurried into a restaurant for a quick breakfast. After eating, Blackie squeezed into a phone booth. He called Henny Cossart first. He held a handkerchief loosely over the mouthpiece and talked through it, low in his throat.

"Hello, Henny," he said. "This is *The Maestro*. I want you to be at the northeast corner of Eighth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street at exactly noon."

There was no answer from the other end for a moment. Then, weakly: "Can't I make it some other time. A little later in the day, maybe. I've got to be at—"

"I don't care, Henny," Blackie interrupted in his muffled voice. "I told you the time. Be there."

He called the other five big name band leaders on his list the same way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meet the Maestro!

AT ONE minute past noon, a cab cruised slowly past the corner of Fifty-Seventh Street and Eighth Avenue. The big black-haired man in the back seat peered tensely through the window at the small group of men standing on the corner. He counted them, and his lips soundlessly formed their names:

"Ben Warner. Henny Cossart. The little guy in the brown suit is Wally Wayne.

Carter Morse. Leonard Fair. . . . That's only five. There's one missing. It worked!"

Several times he had the hack cruise around the block while a name burned through his brain over and over. Duncan King! Duncan King was *The Maestro*!

Ten minutes later, and the fifth time past that spot, there was still no sign of King. The rest of the men were all talking together, excitedly.

Blackie stopped off at a drug store and looked up Duncan King's address. Then he cabbed up to the apartment house on West End avenue where King lived. On the way, he kept going back over all the things he could remember. It stacked up.

Nobody in the profession liked Duncan King. He was an old-timer, a sour-faced, middle-aged man who made no friends in the business. No one knew much about him. But he paid good wages and had some of the best musicians working for him. His music had enjoyed a modest success for a long time.

Blackie could not think of any of King's musicians who had met with accidental deaths at the hands of *The Maestro*. He wondered why King had not occurred to him before.

The apartment house where King lived was an old building, but still handsome, with a certain exclusive air about it. There was a doorman and an elevator operator.

Blackie got out at the eighth floor and walked down the hall to King's apartment. He pushed the bell several times, but no one answered. Then he knocked. At the first beat of his fist the door swung in. Blackie took the automatic out of his pocket and entered.

He stopped just inside the entrance foyer and called: "King! Don't try any stuff. I'm armed. I'm coming in to get you."

When there was no answer, Blackie advanced cautiously along the foyer into the living room. Just inside the door he stopped short. His arm, holding the gun stiffly before him, now fell slowly.

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King was a lanky, awkward figure of a man in gaily-flowered lounging pajamas. He had a dark, bony face. His gray hair was tousled roughly. He was sprawled out on one side, on the carpet next to an ancient desk—with a bullet hole in his temple.

Blackie stood over the corpse several seconds, his jaw hanging loosely, before he saw the typewriter on the desk and the little note next to it. The letter was typed on King's monogrammed stationery:

This is a full confession of my guilt as a murderer and an extortionist. For the past ten years I have been bleeding other band-leaders, calling myself *The Maestro*. You'll find papers and other proof of this in my desk. The fortune I have made in this racket during the last decade has nearly all been lost on bad investments. Since Blackie Blair had finally learned my identity, I had to kill him when he came up here to get me. The game was beginning to peter out, anyhow. Now I am going to shoot myself.

The careless scrawl of King's signature finished the note.

THERE was one thing Blackie didn't get, though. Why should King say he had killed *him* when. . .

The realization of what that part of the confession meant hit Blackie too late. He started to pivot, and the blast of a gunshot filled the room. A burning pain seared through Blackie's head.

Then, slowly, the roaring in his ears faded. Another sound took its place—a scream. It seemed to go through and through him. He found that he was holding onto a big overstuffed chair, climbing to his feet. The red haze which had been all around him cleared, and he discovered he was still in Duncan King's apartment. He shook his head, looked down, saw the corpse there by the desk. Before, there had been no gun in King's hand. Now there was.

The scream came again. This time Blackie located the source of the sound: the elevator operator was standing in the door

SLAY, MAESTRO, SLAY!

of the apartment, poking his fingers into his eyes and letting out steam-whistle blasts.

Blackie's fingers gingerly touched his own head, felt blood oozing from the groove across his temple.

He staggered toward the operator, slapped him soundly across the face, cutting his screams abruptly. "Listen!" Blackie said. "Listen to me. Somebody else was up here with Duncan King before me. Who was it?"

The man took several gasping breaths and said: "I—I dunno, mister. I—I never saw him before. D-d-don't do nothin' to me, mister. I won't say nothin'. I won't tell anybody you shot Mr. King."

"Shut up!" Blackie ordered. "That other guy—what did he look like?"

The elevator operator looked as if he would much rather have used his legs than his brains. But in a few seconds he stammered, "I can't remember. I can't seem to remember anything! I didn't get too good a look, because he didn't ride up with me. That's the only reason I happen to remember him at all."

"He didn't use the elevator?"

"No, sir. He came up to me, downstairs there, and asked for Mr. King's apartment and I told him to get in and I'd take him up. But he—he wouldn't. Said something about needing exercise. He walked up."

"Eight floors!" Blackie yelled.

Then he said no more. He suddenly turned and went back and picked up the little automatic he had dropped to the floor. He shoved the operator back into the lift and made him take him down.

The man watched him stagger drunkenly to the street. Then he dove for the hall phone and started screaming for the police.

BLACKIE had the cabbie drive him past The Strand Building where all the agents' offices are, but the man he was seeking was not hanging out with the crowd of musicians there. Neither was he in front of the Union Hall.



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The cabbie turned around, stared worriedly at the blood on Blackie's forehead. "Hey, pal," he said. "I can't drive you around any more. You're done in bad. I got to get you to a hospital. You're losing blood like a stuck pig!"

Blackie fought off the black waves of unconsciousness that threatened to sweep over him. Weakly, he pulled the automatic from his pocket.

"Do as I say," he ordered thickly. "I want to go to the Arcade Building up in Columbus Circle. Don't get any silly ideas or you'll be looking worse than I do."

The hackie shrugged, muttered under his breath, and drove on. Blackie fell out of the cab in front of the address he had given and flung the driver a bill. He scanned the directory of the Arcade Building and stumbled toward the elevators.

"Second floor," he told the boy.

Blackie swayed out of the elevator and down the second floor hall to an office door. He twisted the knob and half fell into a small office. The plump, pale man behind a desk looked up, almost jumped right out of his bright blue gabardine suit.

"Blackie Blair!" he screamed. "You're hurt! You'd better—"

"Sure I'm hurt, Courtney," Blackie butted in. He leaned one hand on the corner of the desk, teetered back and forth. But his automatic didn't shift from the head it had taken on Harry Courtney's face. "Hurt, but not dead. You hurried things a little too much up in King's place, Harry. You were worried about the elevator boy hearing those shots and coming up and catching you there. So now the thing you've been fretting about ever since that night I cornered you in a closet six years ago, has come true. I've tied things up, Harry. I've finally figured why *The Maestro* made that crazy suicide leap out the window."

"Blair, boy, you're delirious!" Courtney gasped. "Let me call a doctor!"

"Get up from that desk, Harry," Blackie

SLAY, MAESTRO, SLAY!

ordered. Courtney obeyed, and Blackie circled behind him, rammed the gun into his back, marched him toward the door. While he did this he said, "You acted that way that night, Harry, because you suffer from claustrophobia—a dread of confined places. You went crazy, completely off your nut, there in the dark, locked up in that tiny closet. . . And you've been afraid, ever since, that I would some day realize that and tie it in with the fact that since Harry Courtney is claustrophobic, he must be *The Maestro!*"

Blackie forced Courtney out of the office and into the hall. He jammed the elevator button.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Blair," Courtney screamed. "You're out of your mind!"

Just then two elevator doors opened. One, empty had come in answer to Blackie's ring. The other disgorged the building starter, a frightened operator and a policeman. They all yelled at once as they saw Blackie shove Courtney into the other lift.

Waving the gun at the operator Blackie said, "Take this thing up and stop it between floors."

COURTNEY was huddled in a corner. But he wasn't looking at Blackie's automatic. His eyes were wild. The cigar bobbed crazily in his heavy lips, and he had his hands outspread along two walls of the lift as though trying to shove them back.

When the car jerked to a halt, Blackie tossed a glance at the indicator, saw that they were between the fourth and fifth floors.

"Listen," he told the boy. "Listen carefully to all this." Then Blackie turned to Courtney. "This is a very small place, this elevator, Harry. You don't like 'em, do you? That's why you walked the eight floors up to King's apartment. That tipped me off. I remembered how when you worked in my band, you never would use

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elevators when we played hotel roofs. It's going to get sweating hot and stuffy in here awfully fast, Harry. Start speling. Tell this boy how you killed King, and Bobby Rey, and all the rest. Tell him how you tried to kill me, too. Tell him that you're *The Maestro*. . . ."

"My God, yes!" Courtney screeched. Saliva dribbled from the corners of his mouth. "I'm the one. I'm *The Maestro*. I—I did it all. Let me out of here!"

He leaped madly toward the controls, but Blackie stuck out a foot and tripped him. Then he said to the boy, "All right, kid. Take us down."

The elevator jerked, shot downward. The doors slammed open. Blackie's knees buckled and he went crashing against the side of the car as Harry Courtney, screaming at the top of his lungs, slammed him aside and leaped out into the hall.

Just as Blackie fell, he fired after Courtney's fat flying figure. But the man who had called himself *The Maestro* didn't stop. He went right out onto the street. That was all Blackie saw of him. Of anything, for quite awhile.

Later, when they had him in the hospital, all patched up, Blackie told the police the rest of the story. He told them how Courtney must have conceived of *The Maestro* idea when he was playing in Blackie's band, how he held onto the job and later took over leadership of the outfit as a cover-up.

Blackie told them, too, about his scheme, telephoning the six leaders. Courtney, he said, hadn't been on his list because he was not a leader when the extortion racket had first begun. They figured, though, that Courtney had been with one of those six men when he'd received Blackie's call. Courtney, wealthy, and tiring of his racket, saw a good way out of the whole thing.

So Courtney selected King as a logical suspect, because King had been the only leader too scared right from the beginning to buck *The Maestro*. It had not been neces-

SLAY, MAESTRO, SLAY!

sary to kill any of his boys to make him kick in.

After Courtney killed King, he planted the confession note and waited for Blackie. He then ran down the stairs and out through the basement of the building. His whole slate was cleaned. The only man who ever had any reason to connect *The Maestro* with Courtney because of claustrophobia, Blackie Blair, had been put out of the way, he believed.

When Blackie and the police had settled all this Blackie said, "What happened to Courtney, anyhow?"

"He had an accident," a big, redfaced sergeant cut in. "When he looped out of the building, he kept going right on across the street. A car hit him. Yeah!"

It was several weeks before Blackie was able to get someone to sneak his beloved trumpet into his room. He was up, walking around by that time. As soon as he had the instrument, he picked up the portable radio from the table and walked down the hall to the room where a girl named Sandra Rey was convalescing. He came running into her, turned on the radio.

"Listen, Sandy!" he said. "I think I've found something."

Music welled from the radio set and Blackie put the trumpet to his lips. He rode in with the radio band and to you and to me it would have sounded pretty swell, but to Blackie it was more than that. . . .

The music stopped.

He said softly, "Yeah, Sandy? Yeah? It isn't just that I imagine it? It's really there again?"

"Yeah," she said, and there was something the matter with her voice.

Blackie turned his eyes toward her. The bandages were off her face now, and the tears could trickle down the soft skin of her cheeks.

"Well, that's good!" Blackie laughed, but his own eyes were very wet. "What are you crying about, you big baby?" ♦ ♦ ♦

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

less, rather than comply with their demands.

Well, now, it seems that all great master craftsmen like to leave behind them, for posterity, a book dealing with their work. Charles Carney was no exception.

And one day, a couple of decades ago, the super safecracker sat himself down and began to write a book. When he'd finished he had composed the most complete and thorough book on safecracking ever compiled. All the tricks of the trade were there, secrets that only Charles Carney knew, for opening the most stubborn and complicated safes.

H HE HAD no trouble in finding a publisher, of course, who could recognize the book's uniqueness, and could see where, like any great authoritative work in its field, it would become a steady seller. But when police got a copy of it they were horrified.

Here, they realized, was the perfect handbook for the criminal. With it, no vault anywhere would be safe from criminals. The cops had a talk with the author. Charles Carney saw their point right away. And, being the honest man that he was, the master safecracker promptly gathered up all the published books and burned them in a furnace.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that a handful of these books undoubtedly continue to exist on the shelves of private homes. As long as they stay there, everything is all right. But, if one should ever inadvertently stray, and get into the wrong hands, it could set off a chain of safecracking that would do incalculable harm for years to come.

Which, friends, winds up *The Crime Clinic* for this month. We'll be back on the same newsstands in two more months, though, with more of the same action-packed crime-mystery stories and true anecdotes. See you January 21st!

The Editor

CHASE BY NIGHT

(Continued from page 87)

"I'm warning you, Pendleton," Miller growled. "I'll make it so damn' rough for you—"

Jim waved the gun impatiently. "Skip it," he snapped.

"Why make it worse?" Sarah asked, pleading.

Jim gazed at her for a moment, then swung back to Nick. The gunman was scared now.

"You'd better get ready to sing," Jim said. "In just about a minute the sight of your face is going to make me sick. And I've got a strong stomach."

"You wouldn't dare," Nick cried.

Jim flicked the pistol down and up. Blood flowed from Nick's jaw where the front sight had gouged.

"That was for fun," Jim said tensely. "I got the range. Now I start cutting you to shreds."

The last resistance drained from Nick's face. He twisted toward Miller. "Okay," he said shakily. "Pendleton had nothing to do with it. It . . . it was my idea . . . to get even for my brother."

Jim pushed the pistol against Nick's cheek. "How did you learn the safe combination?"

"Willie and I stopped at Barney's one night at closing time," Nick said, pulling his face away from the gun. "Barney was there alone. We took him out for a drink—got him plastered. He . . . he told us everything."

Jim backed across the room and slumped onto the divan. He watched tears dampen the smile on Sarah's happy face.

Miller crossed and reclaimed his gun. "I'll fix this with your parole board," he said. "Might even request the governor to grant a full pardon." He looked from Jim to Sarah and grinned, moving to the door. "Come on, Nick."

Jim leaned his head back as Sarah slipped into his arms. ♦ ♦ ♦

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TWO IN ONE

By BESS RITTER

HOW many shots did you say you heard, Madam?

This simple little question cracked one of the neatest real-life detective puzzlers on police records.

The case took place in Cleveland not so very long ago, when a man and his wife were overheard quarreling violently by nearby-living neighbors. The actual words couldn't be clearly distinguished, but everyone heard a shot from a revolver.

The police confirmed this last, because the scene of the crime consisted of a very dead woman lying prone on her bed. She was shot through the heart. The gun was ten feet away. Nevertheless the husband hysterically insisted, "She killed herself, I tell you!"

"And then undoubtedly got up to put the gun behind the trunk before settling down to die," commented an unbelieving cop.

"No!" screamed the accused, "it blew out of her hand. I saw it. I swear it!"

The autopsy, however, seemed to thoroughly clinch the open-and-shut case that the State had established: There were two bullets in the body—and by what trick of magic could a woman first shoot herself dead, then fire a second time, and finally place the weapon in question on the room's other side?

But one of the detectives had a shadow of a doubt, rooted in three small suspicions. The first was the sincerity of the protests of the prisoner. No one in his right mind could doubt that he was telling the truth. The second was the peculiarity of the wound in the corpse. There was only one, apparently with both bullets lodged inside it. And the third—and most curious—was the testimony of the witnesses.

"There was only one shot. I'm quite positive," each claimed.

TWO IN ONE

THESE things seemed unimportant to the others on the case, but enough to send this sleuth off to the experts in ballistics.

"Perhaps," one suggested, "there was a two-in-one shot. That is, if a first shot had been fired a few days previous to the killing, got jammed in the barrel and remained there until the day of the tragedy. Then, when the second bullet was released, its force pushed the first one out as well."

"Would there," asked the detective, "be much of a recoil?"

"That's an easy one to answer, but the distance would be undeterminable. Certainly, there'd be sufficient to dislodge the weapon completely from the hand of the person who was doing the shooting. It might even send the pistol flying clear across the room."

And the case was closed—in no time flat. ♦ ♦ ♦

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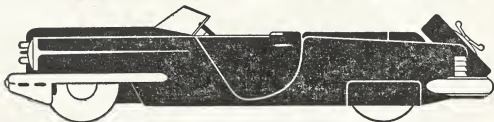
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